

WEST MALLING PARISH COUNCIL

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**WMPC response to Outline Application 18/02093/OA by Bellway Homes for:
Development comprising up to 80 residential dwellings (including 40% affordable
housing), open space, drainage, access and associated works, with all matters reserved
except for access which is to be considered in detail at this stage | Field At Corner Of
Lavenders Road And Swan Street West Malling Kent**

West Malling Parish Council strongly objects, in principle, to this application. We believe that development on this greenfield site will damage the rural character of West Malling. It would harm the setting of the ancient Abbey; disturb the peace of Lavenders Road - a designated 'Quiet Lane'; and increase the already considerable traffic congestion and hazards on Swan Street.

Additionally, permitting development on this site would undermine the new Local Plan which has been produced following two rounds of public consultation and is shortly to be submitted to the Secretary of State.

At the time of writing, over 120 objections to this application have been lodged on the planning portal - a demonstration of the strength of local feeling against this proposal and the desire to protect West Malling from further urbanisation.

Development on this site would lead to a loss of "distinctive character" and "sense of place" as referenced in the current Local Development Framework.¹

NB We note that this is an Outline Application and all matters are reserved except the number of houses and the access. However, the applicant has chosen to include plans,

illustrations and documents showing how the site would be developed. In the absence of any other information on which to assess the impact of this proposal, we refer to these in our comments.

1 Planning & design

Contrary to the applicant's assertion, this site is not "within the town of West Malling" it is clearly outside the "confines of the built up area" as shown on TMBC's Adopted Proposals Map. It seeks to expand West Malling into open countryside.

The site is, however, crucial to the rural setting of West Malling. Swan Street is a "sunken lane" with extensive hedgerows and tree cover, creating a green corridor. By removing ancient trees and regarding the land to form an access, this proposal would completely destroy the eastern approach to the town. The sylvan setting would be replaced by a suburban one.

It is precisely to protect West Malling from coalescing with surrounding communities that TMBC has included an extension to the Green Belt in the new Local Plan². This extension includes the applicant's site. TMBC's reasons for extending the Green Belt include:

4.10. To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns - West Malling and East Malling are historic settlements including several Listed Buildings and being covered by Conservation Areas. The proposed extension of the outer boundary to Watlington Road would strengthen this particular purpose of the Green Belt by protecting the setting of these settlements which would help preserve their special characters.

The new Local Plan is not yet adopted but paragraph 49 of the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the circumstances in which an application can be considered "premature".

- a) the development proposed is so substantial, or its cumulative effect would be so significant, that to grant permission would undermine the plan-making process by predetermining decisions about the scale, location or phasing of new development that are central to an emerging plan; and
- b) the emerging plan is at an advanced stage but is not yet formally part of the development plan for the area.

TMBC's plan is at an "advanced stage" (Reg19 consultation) and an application to build 80 houses on land designated Green Belt in that plan would certainly "undermine" the plan-making process.

Design

If the illustrative layouts provided by the applicant are to be taken as a guide, the proposed development is suburban in character and wholly inappropriate for the location.

2 Heritage and archaeology

The site is adjacent, across Lavenders Road, to the Benedictine Abbey of St Mary's, a scheduled ancient monument³ with several Grade 1 Listed elements.

The Abbey has been home to a community of Benedictine nuns since 1916. The community places great value on the quiet and peaceful nature of their home. This would be severely compromised by the proposed development and the Parish Council understands that the Abbey has expressed this view clearly.

It is worth noting that a portion of the application site was submitted under the Local Plan Call for Sites exercise. The final assessment of Site 265, in the north-west corner, noted that "The site impacts on the setting of St Mary's Abbey and other Listed Buildings. This assessment concludes that this site is unsuitable."

TMBC has given clear pre-application advice, quoted in the applicant's heritage statement⁴, that it has:

"serious reservations that the provision of a residential development of this scale and density would satisfactorily respect the prevailing character of the area, particularly given its proximity to St Mary's Abbey."

The advice continues:

"... the siting and amount of built form to the south of this area adjacent to the Abbey, would ... cause harm to the setting of these designated heritage assets."
"...the internal road pattern and general arrangement of the built form of the development would not be sympathetic to the surrounding pattern of development." "The Abbey is a place of historical importance with a distinctly peaceful and private environment which is partly derived from its immediate and wider setting within this part of the town. The introduction of a housing estate, with associated activities, movements and infrastructure has the potential to significantly erode and detract from that setting."

TMBC's advice is very clear and West Malling Parish Council agrees with all of it. The applicants concede that "the insertion of new buildings within the proposed development site would inevitably change the setting of the abbey complex" but simply assert that the proposals would "not harm the setting of the listed buildings,"⁵ without any evidence to support this claim or appreciation of the wider impact. The change is the harm.

In their conclusion, the heritage consultants assert: "The application proposals would change the settings of the majority of the listed buildings and affect the character, appearance and setting of West Malling Conservation Area." This is certainly true.

They continue: "However, the development-free buffer zones planned for the western (sic) and southern sides of Lavenders Road and Swan Street respectively, and the intention of preserving the north-western quadrant of the application site as a green open space would

not result in any harm being caused to the settings of the listed buildings, or the character, appearance and setting of West Malling Conservation Area.”⁶

This conclusion simply cannot be sustained. The regrading of land; the creation of an access road; and the destruction of trees along Swan Street will seriously harm the setting of the listed buildings and the character of the West Malling Conservation Area.

The Parish Council believes the desk-based assessments produced by the applicant’s consultants are based on a very limited range of maps, published historical sources, archaeological records and modern topography and therefore do not take into account the combined evidence for over 2,000 years of settlement in the immediate area.

For example: On the basis that the proposed development site was recorded as 'Fair Field' in the 1840 Tithe Survey, the Desk Based Assessment (p.52), suggests that the field name "may signify a local memory of a field in which the annual medieval and later fairs were held. Should this have been the case, there is a high potential for the survival of unstratified artefact scatters of medieval and post-medieval date, of low significance.”⁷

The significance of the site must be enhanced by earlier references to the "Fayrefeld" in an Abbey rental of 1410⁸, "Faire Field" on estate maps dated 1705 and 1749⁹, and later "Fair Field" in the auction particulars of the Abbey Estate in 1849¹⁰. Throughout this period the Fair Field was a natural extension to the Abbey precinct with attendant heritage value, which was transferred to post-dissolution Abbey owners at least until the 19th century.

Roman settlement in West Malling is currently indicated by scattered coin and pottery finds and outlying cremation burials, but structural remains indicative of settlement sites are unrecorded (Kent Historic Environment Records). However, finds of Roman coins and box-flue tiles in the Abbey precinct¹¹, and building foundations near the Lavenders Road Abbey gateway opposite the south-west corner of the proposed site indicate a streamside settlement in Lavenders Road. This may be associated with the Roman cremation burial recorded at Rathshan, Windmill Lane (550 metres south).

In summary, the history of the proposed site and its environs is still legible and demonstrably sensitive, with high potential for future archaeology and heritage studies.

3 Landscape and Ecology

This proposal would irretrievably damage the local landscape, wildlife habitats and biodiversity.

We note that the Parameter Plan¹² shows the north-west corner of the site as “non-residential usage” and elsewhere it is suggested that this area become a “landscaped village green within a parkland setting¹³.”

It is simply not tenable that biodiversity will either be protected or enhanced if over 40 trees are removed from the site, almost all in the north-west corner; the area landscaped; a road driven through and 80 houses developed on the adjacent fields.

The site is not isolated but linked by arching vegetation to the grounds of Went House and to the Abbey. The ancient hedgerow of Lavenders Road also links the site to Manor Country Park. The gardens of Went House are laid into the tree-covered railway cutting and embankment making the site an extensive ecological corridor.

The site is flanked to the west and north by ancient hedged “hollow ways” - Lavenders Road and Swan Street. To the north-east are views of oast houses, a farm and an unspoiled Victorian railway station. The proposed housing would dominate the entire vista.

We cannot agree with the conclusions of the applicant’s Arboricultural Implications Report¹⁴ that the impact of this proposed development “is of low magnitude.”

The development would see many trees of high landscape and aesthetic value removed, together with their ivy and understory - over 40 trees are to be removed in total. Particularly damaging will be the removal of the fine row of ivy-clad, multi-stemmed, self-sown sycamores on Swan Street. These form an ever changing, overarching canopy growing on the ancient embankment near the junction with Lavenders Road.

The visual importance of this green tunnel, which would be destroyed by these proposals, is noted in the Conservation Area Appraisal¹⁵ and is crucial to views in both directions. It will not be possible to re-plant on the steep embankment and the regrading of land to create 43m long by 2.4m wide “visibility splays” will only make the situation worse. The “hollow way” topographic setting of the listed buildings will be destroyed to create a dreary, contrived suburban vista lacking the elusive sense of place created over centuries.

Additionally, we believe the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment¹⁶ submitted by the applicant potentially misrepresents the visual impact of the proposals.

Appendix 4, includes photographs and “visualisations” purporting to show the view of the Lavenders Road/Swan Street junction, before and after (1 year & 10 years) the proposed development.

The photographs showing the existing view were clearly taken before the trees were in leaf and do not show the way the whole stretch of road looks from Spring to Autumn. The view projected forward after one year is shocking enough, even given the leafless state of existing trees but the predicted views show the new planting in leaf. This greatly enhances their appearance and skews the assessment.

Sites such as this contribute to biodiversity and local impacts accumulate nationally. As a community we should protect such sites, we are on the frontline. Critically important, mature woody plants on the site include:

Sycamores - food for dormice and early nectar for many post hibernation species. Greenfly and insects provide a large part of the diet of bats. The winged seeds are eaten by small mammals.

Beech - insects feed on the leaves and the mast (nuts) are food for mammals.

Ivy - when mature it seethes with bees and pollinators. The dense evergreen foliage gives hibernation sites for butterflies and many moths. Birds, including owls, nest in the protective foliage. Bats roost in the intertwined stems. The site contains a large percentage of the flowering ivy in the Parish.

Hawthorn - vital due to the large number of dependant insect species including pollinators when it is mature.

Bramble - has many dependant species of insects, birds and mammals.

Buckthorn - the only foodplant of the yellow brimstone butterfly..

Elder - very many dependant species, including pollinators such as hoverflies. The berries are an important food source for birds and mammals.

Removing the support for dependant species does not mean they move on. Theoretically all populations are at the limit of the resources available and a proportion of dependants will simply die if these are removed. The above is only a sample of the losses that would be caused by habitat destruction. It is inappropriate to suggest that these species are common. They are rapidly declining and the effects can be seen locally and nationally.

Mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects

There is considerable evidence of the activity of small mammals on site. There are occupation holes in the ivy and banks. There is also a complex of tunnels in a bank which could be a badger's sett, fox earth or rabbit holes.

A short distance away are long established and currently recorded colonies of dormice. Their environment is fragile. This site contains a good range of the food sources required by dormice. There is a very high probability there are dormice on site. Three possible used feeding sites have been recorded.

The applicant's Technical Briefing Note reports that a single slowworm is present on the site. The site is close to the canal (leet) which supplies the mill site waterfall from the country park lake. This canal with ponds is within the adjacent Abbey grounds. Great Crested Newt has been reported from this lake. Toads are known in the area. Amphibians are to be expected.

Gloworms are present in West Malling feeding on the snails. It is likely that they are present on the banks and areas within the site. Light pollution will destroy them. Banded snails and garden snails are numerous.

4 Traffic

The proposed access to this site is located on Swan Street between two junctions with very limited visibility. The junction with the approach to the station is particularly hazardous, especially at peak times.

It is clear to anyone with knowledge and experience of the local situation that access from this site onto Swan Street is impractical. Changes to road layout and/or infrastructure, in an attempt to deal with the inherent problems, will only add to the urbanisation of this area.

In addition, the 43m x 2.4m visibility splays proposed would completely destroy the appearance of the sunken lane.

The implications for traffic of this proposal must be seen in the context of existing pressures and planned development elsewhere. Within a 300 metre stretch of Swan Street/Lucks Hill are three road junctions, including two access roads for the station; the access to a housing development and the entrance to a school.

Swan Street regularly experiences grid lock with the High Street at peak times, especially when buses, agricultural traffic or large delivery vehicles are attempting to pass. Junctions along the A20 are over-capacity¹⁷. The new Local Plan proposes around 900 houses on land north of Kings Hill with a new access road connected to the A228 Ashton Way (West Malling bypass) near the station.

The local road network could not cope with the traffic generated by 80 new houses. An additional vehicle entering or leaving the proposed development every two minutes, as predicted by the applicant, would certainly have an adverse impact. When the Swan Street/High Street junction is blocked, traffic uses Lavenders Road and Water Lane to reach the High Street and destinations to the west. More traffic on these narrow roads would change their character and create additional hazards.

The introduction of more traffic at this point on Swan Street would pose additional hazards for pedestrians using the single pavement and attempting to cross the road at the Lavenders Road junction or walking to the station.

We believe that the additional traffic generated by this proposed development and the worsening of local congestion will lead to a deterioration in air quality, particularly in Swan Street and Lucks Hill adjacent to More Park Primary School.

The suggestion that “future site residents will ... have the opportunity to undertake many journeys by non-car means”¹⁸ is not a reflection of reality. Several major services, including secondary schools, hospitals and two of the three West Malling GP surgeries are not in West Malling. There are no major employers in the town so workers will need to commute - some by train but many by car.

In summary, WMPC, cannot support the conclusion reached by the applicant’s traffic consultants that “the proposed development should not result in significant detrimental impacts in transport terms ...”¹⁹

References

- 1 Managing Development & the Environment DPD p8 paras 2.2.2 & 2.2.3, TMBC, April 2010
- 2 Green Belt Study: Stage Two Report, TMBC, August 2018
- 3 <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1008030>
- 4 Heritage Statement pp6/7, Heritage Collective, August 2018
- 5 ibid p27
- 6 ibid p32
- 7 Archaeological Desk Based Assessment p52, Archaeology Collective, May 2018
- 8 A Kentish Miscellany, Pub. Phillimore, p.46
- 9 British Library, Egerton 3021R and 3021S
- 10 Daniel Smith & Son - Plan for auction of the Abbey Estate, Daniel Smith & Son (Surveyors, Pall Mall) 1849
- 11 St Mary's Abbey archives
- 12 Design & Access Statement p44, Omega Partnership, August 2018
- 13 ibid p51
- 14 Arboricultural Implications Report, SJA Trees, August 2018
- 15 West Malling Conservation Area Appraisal p20, TMBC, November 2002
- 16 Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment, Aspect Landscape Planning, August 2018
- 17 Route Study Summary Report A20 Corridor, KCC, July 2016
- 18 Transport Statement p26 para 6.1.5, DHA Transport, August 2018
- 19 ibid p26 para 6.1.8