

FLETCHING PARISH COUNCIL

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Wealden Draft Local Plan – Focussed Regulation 18 Consultation - March 2026

Representations by Fletching Parish Council

These representations are submitted by Fletching Parish Council (FPC) in response to the Draft Wealden Local Plan 2026 (WDLP) consultation which is being undertaken between 5th February and 20th March 2026.

FPC wishes to place on record its disappointment at the failure of Wealden District Council (WDC) to engage in a full and constructive manner in discussing the concerns expressed by FPC in respect of the previous WDLP Regulation 18 consultation in 2024. Neither has WDC published any specific response to the matters raised by FPC in the previous objections.

It has therefore been necessary to restate these concerns.

It is also vital that WDC acknowledge the burden that is being placed on all members of the public in having to make the same submissions, time and again. In the case of Owlsbury Farm and the Ashdown Business Park Expansion, this the **third time** the public is being asked to comment, assuming that there is not a fourth at the Regulation 19 Stage.

This repetitive process exhausts communities. It is only right therefore that Wealden DC have full regard to the scale and nature of objections already made to these proposals. These objections remain equally valid today. The number of objections, in summary, are: -

Event	Ashdown Business Park Expansion - Objections	Owlsbury Farm Objections
WDLP Reg 18 2024	700	750
Planning Application	660	1,450
WDLP Reg 18 2026	TBC	TBC

FPC is very concerned that there have been numerous reports of the WDC website blocking valid entry with error messages to those members of the public attempting to respond to this consultation. There is no knowing exactly how many people have attempted to comment and have been unable to do so. There does not seem to have been any material effort on the part of WDC to assist the community in gaining entry to the website.

These representations set out FPC's response to the WDLP Regulation 18 consultation 2026 and demonstrate why this Plan is not positively prepared, justified, effective nor consistent with national policy.

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Representations – Executive Summary

Spatial Strategy (Policy SS1) – Question 1

1. The Spatial Strategy in the Wealden District Local Plan should be amended.
2. **Sub-regional spatial geography:** The evidence shows that Wealden is most strongly influenced by the Housing Market Areas (HMAs) of Eastbourne (41%) and Royal Tunbridge Wells (41%). Uckfield lies outside these main HMAs and serves a more localised function. The 2026 Employment and Economic Study confirms the importance of aligning jobs and homes within matching FEMA (Functional Economic Market Area)/HMA boundaries. Large-scale strategic allocations at Uckfield conflict with this fundamental evidence.
3. **Infrastructure and Accessibility:** The south (e.g. Polegate) benefits from strong access to the A27 Strategic Road Network linking to the wider road network. The south is served by the major town centre facilities and multimodal infrastructure of Eastbourne. By contrast, Uckfield is a small remote centre, constrained by congested single carriageway roads (A22/A26/A272) and lacks a credible, deliverable transport strategy to support the District's largest allocations.
4. **Environmental Constraints:** Northern Wealden is a highly sensitive environment due to proximity to Ashdown Forest and the High Weald National Landscape. Monitoring shows (a) ongoing nitrogen exceedances and (b) only 84% of SSSIs in favourable or recovering condition—below the 95% target. Biodiversity constraints are therefore especially important in the area around Uckfield.
5. **Deliverability and Soundness:** The Spatial Strategy relies heavily on the Owlsbury Farm allocation and the Ashdown Business Park Expansion near Ashdown Forest. This approach is not justified, not effective, and not consistent with the National Planning Policy Framework.

Provision of Homes (Policy SS2) - Question 2

6. The Policy is not agreed. The final adopted housing target will be predicated on the outcome of further Option Sites assessments and the result of the Call for Sites. To the extent that the proposed provision relies on Scenario 1 including Owlsbury Farm being allocated (WDLP p 68 Table 4), the provision should be adjusted to exclude reliance on Owlsbury Farm in Little Horsted to which a fundamental objection is lodged for the reasons set out in respect of the response to the Spatial Strategy and the Owlsbury Farm Site Allocation under Policy SA1 and LH1. Thus, Policy SS2 is not agreed as it fails to reflect the Alternative Scenario, Figure 8a and Figure 9a (WDLP pp 67, 78).
7. Policy SS2 is not supported as it relies on Scenario 1, including the Owlsbury Farm allocation, to which there is a fundamental objection.
8. The housing target should instead reflect the Alternative Scenario and exclude Owlsbury Farm, pending further site assessments and Call for Sites outcomes.

Retail Provision and Town Centres (Policy SS4) - Question 4

9. Restricting retail to defined town centres is essential. The out-of-town retail/hotel development at Maresfield has caused congestion, higher emissions, and harm to Uckfield's vitality. Vacancy rates alone misrepresent town centre health because existing lease commitments delay vacancy until the end of a lease in the future; declining retail mix also signals long-term deterioration. There is ambiguity over Oakwood Park A22 frontage.

Provision of Employment Floorspace (Policy SS5) - Question 5

10. Policy SS5 is not supported because the proposed employment provision of at least 159,530 sq m is excessive, unjustified, and based on flawed assumptions. It relies on delivery of the full housing target (1,457 dwellings per annum), yet the draft Plan currently identifies only 61% of that requirement (excluding Owlsbury Farm). Even if the housing target were met, forecast job growth would not justify the scale of employment floorspace proposed.
11. The 2026 Employment and Economic Study identifies modest and uncertain employment growth, with strongest demand in small-scale, flexible units rather than large strategic B2/B8 or science-

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park style development. Growth sectors such as professional services, health, education, tourism and hybrid working are not land-intensive. Market demand in north Wealden is fragmented and localised, not strategic.

12. The Study contains significant methodological flaws that inflate need, including reliance on a short post-recession time period, inappropriate flexibility and vacancy allowances (including double counting), inflated frictional vacancy rates, compounding of adjustments, and a broad replacement demand allowance inconsistent with stronger new employment protection policies. A corrected Labour Supply Model indicates a requirement of approximately 19.8 ha for industrial and warehousing land—around half the Study’s 38.4 ha figure and far below the 70.48 ha identified in the Study.
13. Market evidence is anecdotal rather than robust. Assertions of strong demand, inward investment, and commuting reduction lack substantiation. The closure of the John Lewis distribution hub at Ashdown Business Park illustrates locational limitations. Claims of demand from unspecified “high-tech or science-based occupiers” are unsupported by sector evidence, take-up data, or infrastructure capacity analysis.
14. The approach is aspiration-led rather than evidence-led, risks over-allocation and long-term site stagnation, and could lead to pressure for future re-designation. The proposed expansion of the Ashdown Business Park lacks demonstratable need, transport justification, and environmental safeguards.
15. Overall, Policy SS5 is unsound under paragraph 35 of the National Planning Policy Framework because it is not justified, not effective, and not consistent with national policy requiring proportionate, evidence-based and deliverable employment strategies aligned with sustainable development principles.

Strategic Employment Allocations (Policy SS6) - Question 6

16. Policy SS6 is unsound as it relies on the inflated employment need set out in Policy SS5, including 47.8 ha (194,400 sq m) of floorspace which substantially exceeds evidenced requirements.
17. While southern allocations (EMP1–4), including Land at North Polegate, are appropriately located near the Strategic Road Network (A27) and Eastbourne, any further strategic allocation at Maresfield near the High Weald National Landscape—particularly expansion of the Ashdown Business Park—is unjustified, environmentally harmful, and unsupported by robust evidence.

OEMP4 Ashdown Business Park (Maresfield)

18. Option OEMP4 proposes expansion of Ashdown Business Park (ABP) at Maresfield as a Strategic Employment Allocation. This option is not supported because it is not justified by need, and is poorly located, environmentally constrained, and inconsistent with national planning policy.
19. **Lack of Evidenced Need** - The case for expansion relies on the inflated employment land requirement set out in Policy SS5. The 2026 Employment and Economic Study identifies modest and uncertain growth, strongest in small-scale and flexible units rather than large-format industrial, warehousing, or science-park style development. Assertions of demand from “high-tech or science-based occupiers” are unsupported by sector analysis, confirmed requirements, take-up rates, or infrastructure evidence. Market signals cited are anecdotal rather than robust.
20. The closure of the John Lewis distribution hub at ABP demonstrates the locational limitations of the site for large-scale logistics and distribution uses. There is no clear evidence that strategic occupiers require expansion in this rural location.
21. **Unsustainable Location and Transport Constraints** - ABP is not well related to the main strategic road network compared with southern sites near the A27 corridor. Access relies primarily on constrained local roads (A26/A22/A272) which already experience congestion. The site lacks strong public transport connectivity and is not integrated with major centres of skilled labour, higher education institutions, or established economic clusters.

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22. The proposal assumes that allocating land will stimulate demand and reduce commuting, yet no substantive evidence is provided to demonstrate this outcome.
23. **Environmental and Landscape Constraints** - The site lies close to the High Weald National Landscape and close to Ashdown Forest, an internationally protected habitat. The northern part of the District is environmentally sensitive, with documented nitrogen exceedances and biodiversity pressures. Expanding ABP risks additional traffic, air quality impacts, and harm to protected landscapes and habitats without clear justification of overriding need.
24. **Deliverability and Risk** - There is no clear evidence that the scale of expansion is commercially deliverable. Over-allocation risks long-term stagnation, pressure for alternative uses, and piecemeal development inconsistent with plan objectives. Existing employment land has already been lost at ABP to retail and other non-employment uses, reflecting weak employment demand. PFAS contamination and infrastructure capacity issues further undermine deliverability.
25. **Soundness Conclusion** - OEMP4 represents an aspiration-led rather than evidence-led allocation. It relies on inflated employment forecasts, lacks robust market justification, is poorly aligned with infrastructure capacity, and would result in environmental harm. The proposal is therefore not justified, not effective, and not consistent with the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework for proportionate evidence, sustainable spatial strategy, and environmental protection.
26. For all these reasons, OEMP4 Ashdown Business Park should not be taken forward in the Local Plan.

Housing and Mixed Use Site Allocations (Policy SA1) - Question 11

27. **Land at Owlsbury Farm (Policies SA1 & LH1)** -The proposed allocation of 1,500 dwellings at Owlsbury Farm is also strongly opposed and should be deleted from the WDLP. The site has been repeatedly assessed and previously found unsuitable in the 2024 SHEELA due to ancient woodland, flood risk, landscape sensitivity, infrastructure deficits, highway constraints, and failure to form a sustainable urban extension. Despite this, it is proposed as the largest allocation in the Plan.
28. **Reasons for objections** - The proposal has generated substantial public and technical objection (around 750 objections at Regulation 18 stage and approximately 1,450 objections to planning application WD/2025/0922/MEA). Key statutory consultees have raised fundamental unresolved concerns regarding highway capacity and safety on the A22, flood risk (including Flood Zone 3), wastewater and sewer capacity, potable water supply, ecology, ancient woodland impacts, air quality, and harm to heritage assets. Ecological surveys and mitigation strategies remain incomplete, and impacts on irreplaceable habitats are considered unacceptable.
29. **Unsuitable and unsustainable location** - Owlsbury Farm represents a major breach of the long-established A22 settlement boundary, creating a detached, car-dependent development west of Uckfield rather than a sustainable extension. The site is poorly integrated with the town centre, severed by the A22, and reliant on complex crossings of the A22, overly lengthy, uncertain or unattractive walking and cycling routes. Proposed A22 dualling would further increase severance. There is no credible, funded, vision-led transport strategy to demonstrate sustainable connectivity.
30. **Water services and Flood** - The site is heavily constrained by fluvial and surface water flood risk within the River Uck catchment, a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone, and an area already experiencing cumulative water quality and wastewater spill issues. Large areas of the site flood regularly, undermining the functionality of proposed SANG land and increasing downstream risk. Water supply and sewerage capacity are uncertain and unresolved.
31. **Environment** - The development would also result in the loss of productive agricultural land, harm to landscape character, coalescence pressures between surrounding settlements, damage to the High Weald setting, and impacts on ancient woodland, biodiversity corridors, and protected habitats including nearby Ashdown Forest.

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32. **Community infrastructure services** – The impact on health, education, and community infrastructure capacity has not been demonstrated.
33. Cumulatively, the allocation fails the soundness tests in paragraph 35 of the National Planning Policy Framework. It is (a) not justified (contradicts earlier evidence and ignores unresolved objections), (b) not effective (significant infrastructure and environmental constraints undermine deliverability), (c) not consistent with national policy (conflicts with policies on flood risk, ancient woodland, biodiversity, heritage, countryside protection and sustainable transport), and (d) not positively prepared.
34. For these reasons, the Owlsbury Farm allocation is unsound and should be removed from the Draft Local Plan.

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Representations of Fletching Parish Council

Spatial Strategy for Wealden, Policy SS1 - Question 1

35. The Spatial Strategy set out in the current WDLP should be amended further. Major Strategic Allocations for Industry and Warehousing development should be focused in the south of the District for the following reasons: -
- The Spatial Strategy must consider the broader regional structure and character, not focusing solely on Wealden and local Functional Economic Market Areas (FEMAs) in isolation.
 - Proximity to the regional town centre of Eastbourne would be more appropriate than in the substantially more remote rural areas to the north around Uckfield. Uckfield and Maresfield lack the services, facilities and multimodal transport infrastructure of the major town centre of Eastbourne.
 - The south of the District, e.g. Polegate, is well connected to the Strategic Road Network of the A27 leading to the A&M23/M25/A21 for major industrial and warehouse related transport and other movement.
 - Uckfield is only served by the congested single carriageway roads A272/A22/A26.
 - The wider Uckfield area is of international and national ecological sensitivity given that the designated Ashdown Forest is so close, 3km. Monitoring stations still showed, in 2023/2024, an excess to the critical load for nitrogen and for ammonia.
 - The Authority Monitoring Report 2024/2025 December 2025 shows that, during the 2024/25 monitoring period, the proportion of SSSIs that are in a favourable or unfavourable recovering position has stayed the same as before (2023/24) at 84%. This means that, in the 2024/25 monitoring period, the 95% target has been missed.
 - There are still no SSSI units within Wealden District which are either part destroyed or fully destroyed, although 14.3% of SSSI units (33 units overall) are described as 'unfavourably declining'.
 - Biodiversity and ecological sensitivity and vulnerability are more pronounced in the north of the District, around Uckfield and Maresfield and near the Ashdown Forest, than in the south.
 - The south of the District faces fewer constraints, as evidenced by the Council's data, making it a more suitable location for strategic development land allocations.
36. All the available evidence clearly supports adoption in the WDLP of an alternative Spatial Strategy to be based on a clear policy of restricting strategic employment land allocations to the southern areas of the District.
37. Furthermore, the WDLP Spatial Strategy makes clear (p 68 para 4.34) that Housing Market Areas (HMAs) of greatest influence on Wealden are Eastbourne and Tunbridge Wells covering 75% of the Wealden population, the greatest of which is Eastbourne at 41%. Uckfield lies entirely outside these HMAs being influenced only by Coastal West Sussex. Uckfield serves a relatively small, localised population. The very slow rate of (a) the sale of homes at Ridgewood and (b) building-out the development clearly demonstrate the shallow demand and the lack of major influence of other HMAs in the Uckfield area. Homes built recently in the Parish of Fletching have also failed to sell. Thus, an allocation of the scale of Owlsbury Farm is inconsistent with the Spatial Strategy analysis.
38. It is also significant that the Employment and Economic Study Eastbourne and Wealden Update 2026 concludes (p1 para 0.4) that the alignment of FEMA with the Housing Market Area (HMA) boundaries is maintained, "**which offers pragmatic benefits for aligning jobs and homes**".
39. The regional related function of Wealden is therefore clearly skewed to the north-east and south and not to Uckfield which has a substantially more local function. This is a further reason why a Strategic Employment Allocation near Uckfield is wholly inconsistent with the FEMA and HMA spatial analyses.

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40. In addition, there is no credible and deliverable vision-led transport strategy to overcome the acknowledged constraints of the A22/A26/A272 around Uckfield and the neighbouring Parishes.
41. Thus, the proposals to make the single largest residential and employment land allocations across the entire District at Uckfield/Maresfield, are fundamentally flawed and not supported by the evidence.
42. The largest residential allocation in the entire WDLP is **Land at Owlsbury Farm Policies SA1 and LH1** under Scenario 1. The Spatial Strategy as a whole is predicated on this allocation.
43. There is no evidence that the constraints on the Owlsbury Farm development can be mitigated. The Alternative Scenario deletes Owlsbury Farm given its inherent inability to constitute a sustainable, suitable and deliverable site for an urban settlement. The detailed site specific issues relating to the allocation are assessed below in relation to **Policies SA1 and LH1**.
44. The **Ashdown Business Park Expansion Option** should also be deleted under **Policy SS6**. The detailed site specific issues relating to this allocation are assessed below in relation to **Policies SS5, SS6 and OEMP 4**.
45. In summary, the concentration of the District's largest housing and employment allocations at Uckfield/Maresfield, including Owlsbury Farm and Strategic Employment Land expansion near Ashdown Forest, conflicts with the NPPF's requirements for sustainable development, infrastructure-led growth, environmental protection, a strategy justified by proportionate evidence and a proper consideration/analysis of reasonable alternatives.
46. **Overall Soundness Conclusion** -The Spatial Strategy (Policy SS1) is unsound under paragraph 35 of the NPPF 2024 because it is:
 - a. **Not justified** (para 35(b)) — as it fails to align with HMA/FEMA evidence, ignores reasonable southern alternatives, and does not adequately address environmental constraints.
 - b. **Not effective** (para 35(c)) — as transport constraints and ecological impacts cannot be demonstrably mitigated and infrastructure is not deliverable.
 - c. **Not consistent with national policy** (para 35(d)) — for example in relation to Paras 7–11 – Sustainable development principles; Paras 84–89 – Economic growth and locational requirements; Paras 109–115 – Transport and infrastructure; Paras 180–186 – Biodiversity and habitats protection.
47. **Local Gaps** - The Spatial Strategy also fails to consider or to make provision for strategic and local gaps between, and around, settlements. This is a well-known planning policy instrument and should be applied to land to the west of the A22 around Uckfield to maintain settlement identity, to protect the Weald and to support local distinctiveness of villages.

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Provision of Homes Policy SS2 Question 2

48. The Policy is not agreed. The final adopted housing target will be predicated on the outcome of further Option Sites assessments and the result of the Call for Sites. To the extent that the proposed provision relies on Scenario 1 including Owlsbury Farm being allocated (WDLP p 68 Table 4), the provision should be adjusted to exclude reliance on Owlsbury Farm in Little Horsted to which a fundamental objection is lodged for the reasons set out in respect of the response to the Spatial Strategy and the Owlsbury Farm Site Allocation under Policy SA1 and LH1. Thus, Policy SS2 is not agreed as it fails to reflect the Alternative Scenario, Figure 8a and Figure 9a (WDLP pp 67, 78).

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Retail Provision and Town Centres Policy SS4 - Question 4

49. Restricting further retail provision to defined Town Centres is both supported and is essential. The development of out-of-town retail/hotel uses at Maresfield has had major adverse impacts and, with hindsight, should not have been permitted. This development represents a failure to protect existing employment land of a Strategic Employment Site. The adverse impacts include substantial highway congestion due to location and constrained highway capacity. This is evident from the queues at roundabouts at peak times, and the speed with which tailbacks build up if there is any interruption to traffic flows on the A272. There is also a fundamental lack of adequate and effective public transport.
50. Other adverse impacts include an increase of GHG emissions due to car mode drivetime catchments; and harm to town centres such as Uckfield. Para 3.88 (WDLP p 97) relies on vacancy as the test of health, but vacancy is only one, short term, indicator of the vitality of the town centre. Lease commitments mean that harm to vitality and viability only emerge over time. Furthermore, qualitative assessment of mix is highly material as to the health of centre. For example, the prevalence of charity shops in Uckfield, as “meanwhile uses” during the unexpired term of a business retailer’s ongoing lease commitment, is an early sign that the market is disinvesting from a town centre. It is an indicator that the trajectory is downward, even though the unit is not (yet) empty. Another indicator is the increasingly poor mix with an unbalanced number of coffee shops and nail bars displacing the convenience and comparison goods offer.
51. There is ambiguity in the treatment of the Oakwood Park frontage to the A22 in respect of Site 980/3120, as shown in Sustainability Appraisal Jan 2026 (SA) Part 3 Strategic Site Assessments (p 49). This notation appears to exclude the frontage land in respect of which there have been suggestions of inappropriate out of town retail development.

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Provision of Employment Floorspace Policy SS5 Question 5

52. This policy is not agreed. The current provision proposed of at least 159,530 sq m is excessive. It assumes that the dwellings target of 1,457 p.a. can be met in full and fails to reflect the actual housing target which will ultimately be shown to be achievable. The current draft Plan is well short (61%) of the stated housing target. Furthermore, even if it assumed that the full housing target could be met, the jobs required for the future population do not require that level of employment floorspace.
53. It is agreed that new office floorspace should be restricted to designated Centres identified in Policy TC1.
54. **Employment and Economic Study Eastbourne and Wealden Update 2026 (2026 Study)** It is necessary to be clear on the **context** within which the Study has been prepared. As the Study explains: -
- Employment growth forecasts for Wealden are modest and uncertain, with long-term trends indicating weak growth in traditional B-class employment sectors.
 - Growth sectors identified in the Study—such as professional services, health, education, tourism, and home-based or hybrid working—are not land-intensive and do not require large-scale strategic employment sites.
 - Declining economic activity rates, an ageing population, and skills constraints, all limit the realistic capacity of the District to absorb and to sustain significant new employment land.
 - Demand is strongest for small to medium-sized, flexible units, often serving local businesses.
 - There is limited evidence of demand for large-format B2/B8 development or science-park-style expansion in environmentally sensitive or semi-rural locations.
 - Market feedback indicates that employment demand in the north of the District is fragmented and localised rather than strategic in nature.
55. **Methodology** - The 2026 Study demonstrates serious deficiencies in methodology and contains a number of missteps and departures from best practice.
- These errors individually and cumulatively substantially inflate the calculated need for employment floor space and include:-
- Core assumption that the prescribed housing target can be met in full;
 - Incorrect time series analysis;
 - Inappropriate adjustments to demand calculations;
 - Errors enlarged by compounding calculations;
 - Labour demand calculation not followed through and not selected as the base model;
 - Lack of credible and demonstrable evidence of market demand;
 - Failure to identify the extent to which existing planned supply already meets the corrected employment land requirement;
 - Lack of evidence of any weight to support the assertion of unidentified “high-tech or science-based occupiers” seeking floorspace at Ashdown Business Park.
56. **Housing Target** - Of course, the Model’s primary foundational assumption is that the housing target of 1,457 dpa will be met in full, yet at this stage of the DLP, only 61% of the target is met (excluding Owlsbury Farm). It follows that there is no evidence that this target can be met..
57. **Time series analysis** – The 2026 Study works from a base year of 2011/12. Thus, the period starts after the Great Financial Crisis. When considering past trends, 1991 to 2025 is regarded as an appropriate period as it represents at least one full cycle of the economy encompassing (a) the

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period of growth before the 2008-2009 recession, (b) the economic downturn that followed, and (c) the eventual economic recovery up to recent years. Thus, the 2026 Study is using only a short term, higher trend, recovery period from which to extrapolate. Thus, the trend line adopted is too high.

58. **Adjustments** - Whilst it has not yet been possible to check the underlying data used in the 2026 Study from primary sources, which are not published, the missteps in the use of the base data, particularly in relation to “adjustments” set out in Table 7.5 (page 71), are as follows:

- a. **Margin for Flexibility/Buffer** – the margin for flexibility is normally applied to allow some flexibility of provision to compensate for factors such as delays in development sites coming forward, **and allowance for vacancy and market choice**.
- b. There is a need to ensure a reasonable, but not over-generous, additional allowance that provides for some flexibility but avoids over-provision of land through policy. It is usually acceptable to use two years of **average net (rather than gross) completions** to provide for flexibility of provision.
- c. However, the 2026 Study inflates the margin by applying a **gross** allowance, not a net allowance.
- d. Secondly the Study then double counts the vacancy allowance by adding a further vacancy adjustment in addition to that already included in the Flexibility Margin.
- e. This inflationary effect is increased further given the overly high frictional vacancy adjustment applied.
- f. **Frictional Vacancy Adjustment** – In double counting, the Study applies a frictional vacancy rate of 7.5% across all employment land use sectors. This approach fails to have regard to the different rates applicable to each sector. In some office markets 7.5% may be appropriate. However, for industrial and warehouse markets, the optimum frictional vacancy rate of a 5% benchmark is commonly used as a reasonable allowance unless there is strong local evidence to justify a higher figure. There is no evidence that Wealden requires a higher frictional vacancy rate than the usual allowance. There is no justification as to why a rural district such as Wealden should adopt a high frictional vacancy allowance. Wealden has a normal market vacancy rate of 5.2%. Inflating the vacancy rate inflates the purported requirement.
- g. **Replacement Demand as allowance for losses** - There are four main approaches to calculating an allowance for the loss of employment floor space:
 - i. **Forecasting** future losses based on past trends is inherently uncertain, as there is no definitive way to predict how much space will be lost and future conditions may differ significantly from the past.
 - ii. Making an **overall adjustment** to the preferred scenario is simpler but relies on broad assumptions.
 - iii. **Monitoring losses** through periodic Local Plan reviews avoids speculative forecasting, yet it has a significant limitation: any policy response would be delayed by several years, reducing the ability to react quickly to emerging shortages of high-quality, occupied space.
 - iv. The **most robust method** is a **qualitative assessment** of existing employment sites to identify those likely to be lost to alternative uses and to model different future scenarios accordingly. This approach strengthens the evidence base and supports informed decisions about safeguarding or releasing sites.
- h. Therefore, an overall replacement demand adjustment, as adopted in the 2026 Study, should not be applied because it risks either over-protecting sites that are no longer viable or failing to safeguard valuable employment land. Relying on a broad, plan-wide allowance can therefore distort land requirements and reduce the precision and responsiveness of the strategy.

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- i. **New Policy** - Furthermore, the DLP is introducing new policy to give stronger protection to employment land use than was the case in the past. Therefore, the past rate of historical losses is not only an imprecise and overly broad assumption but also would be inconsistent with the emerging employment land use protection policy framework. The new policy will reduce the historic rate of losses in the future.
59. **Compounding** - The inflationary effect of each incorrect adjustment made is inflated yet further. This is because the calculations in Table 7.5 are mathematically compounded one upon another at each step in the tabulated calculation.
60. **Labour Supply Corrected Calculation** - Applying a more appropriate method in order to revise the calculation of the Labour Supply Model produces a different outcome to the land requirement, even when assuming that the prescribed housing target is met in full. Focusing on industrial and warehousing, the land requirement calculation becomes: -

Land Use Table 7.3	Labour Supply Table 7.3 sqm	Add 2 years net completions Table 7.4 sqm	Labour Supply including Buffer sqm	Deduct Commitments Table 7.11 sqm	Residual Need sqm	Land Requirement 40% density ha
Industrial	-1,078	7,454	6,376			
Warehousing	91,815	5,546	97,361			
Total			103,737	24,731	79,006	19.8

61. **Market Demand** – The 2026 Study refers to “Market signals and stakeholder engagement” indicating strong ongoing demand and “reported” lack of flexibility (para 7.44). The Study critically relies on mere opinion and stakeholder engagement, not on any concrete independent evidence to support the assertions made. The Study relies simply on hearsay assertions that lack any clear evidence or justification. The Study justifies the higher per annum requirement on the “levels of heightened market demand across Wealden” (para 7.46) – again these are unsubstantiated by hard evidence. The Study relies heavily on anecdotal commentary rather than demonstratable demand.
62. In fact, John Lewis opened a distribution hub at Ashdown Business Park in 2016 to serve stores and fulfil deliveries in the South East of England. However, the company later stated that the depot was underused and not sustainable to run. As a result, it decided to close the site and consolidate operations elsewhere. The lease was surrendered. This evidentially demonstrates the limitation of the location for distribution.
63. The Study also seeks to justify the requirement by assertions of more local employment and potential reduction in commuting – with no supporting evidence (para 7.46).
64. The Study offers no explanation as to why the Net Absorption Model (19.6 ha), set out in Table 7.8, is not assessed further.
65. **Land Requirement** – By using the Past Take Up Model based on short term inflated cycle completions rates and inflated by inappropriate allowances and then assessing land supply, the 2026 Study seeks to identify a **residual** need for **38.4 ha** of industrial and warehouse land (para 7.51), prior to local plan allocations. (This figure of 38.4 ha is virtually double the figure emerging from the corrected Labour Supply Model of **19.8 ha**). These DLP allocations are set out at paras 7.48 and 7.49.

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Site	Hectares
Coxlow Farm	1.00
Knights Farm West	17.30
Woodside Park	5.58
Land at North Polegate	46.60
Total	70.48

66. This total of 70.48 ha is far in excess of the inflated purported need for 38.4 ha of land, especially bearing in mind that office floorspace requirement is low and is directed to town centres. The total is 3.5 times the size of the correct Labour Supply requirement of 19.8 ha.
67. **Ashdown Business Park** - Finally the 2026 Study asserts that the Ashdown Business Park Extension be investigated (para 9.16) without any convincing evidence of demand or other justification. The criticism set out above in respect of Spatial Strategy also undermines the case for any allocation of a Strategic Employment Land site at Ashdown Business Park.
68. Indeed, the lack of employment land demand led to the introduction of other land uses, e.g. Marks and Spencer, Home Bargains, Premier Inn and Costa Coffee and thus the loss of this land from the employment land supply.
69. The Economic Study references Ashdown Business Park as being “pitched” for unspecified and undefined “high-tech or science-based occupiers” (para 5.96). However, it provides no substantive evidence of:
- Confirmed market demand for expansion at this scale.
 - Identified specific sectors within the broad and vague category of “high-tech or science-based occupiers” requiring any land in a Maresfield location or indeed in Wealden (for example, is this a reference to data centres (requiring high volumes of cooling infrastructure; high-speed, reliable network connections; physical security; and multiple, and backup, feeds of uninterruptible power supply?); or
 - Take-up rates for these unspecified “high-tech or science-based sectors” that would justify land release especially in this remote rural location with poor infrastructure and other services. Furthermore, Ashdown Business Park is not well integrated with major centres of relevant highly skilled population, academic/science-based institutions or public transport networks.
70. The WDLP approach represents a policy-led aspiration rather than an evidence-led requirement, contrary to the NPPF.
71. The WDLP’s approach—especially in relation to Ashdown Business Park—conflicts with the NPPF by prioritising aspirational growth over realistic delivery and by failing to demonstrate that allocated land meets clearly evidenced needs.
72. While the Economic Study identifies a theoretical quantitative need for employment land under certain scenarios, it also omits (or simply disregards) extensive relevant and reliable evidence whilst including methodological errors which undermine the scale of employment land provision being advanced in the WDLP.
73. The WDLP’s employment strategy, including the Ashdown Business Park Expansion, is not effective because:
- It assumes that allocating land will stimulate demand, rather than responding to demonstrated evidence led need.
 - It relies on optimistic assumptions and assertions about market demand and inward investment.

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- c. It fails to make any reference to deliverability in the context of PFAS contamination issues which are unresolved (see OEMP 4 consideration below).
 - d. It risks long-term stagnation of allocated sites, creating pressure for later re-designation for housing as has already happened for retail.
 - e. National policy does not support over-allocation or speculative provision of employment land, particularly where this undermines environmental objectives or leads to unsustainable spatial outcomes.
74. The circular logic adopted in the WDLP undermines the overall soundness of the Plan.
75. In summary, employment land provision substantially exceeds objectively evidenced need, is based on inflated assumptions, and promotes expansion at locations such as Ashdown Business Park without robust evidence of need or transport justification. The policy is unsound.
76. **Overall Soundness Conclusion - Policy SS5 is unsound under paragraph 35 of the NPPF 2024** because it is:
- a. **Not Justified (para 35(b))**
 - i. Employment floorspace requirement is inflated through inappropriate methodology.
 - ii. It relies on anecdotal market signals rather than robust evidence.
 - iii. It assumes housing growth that is not demonstrated to be deliverable.
 - iv. It fails to assess reasonable lower-growth alternatives properly.
 - b. **Not Effective (para 35(c))**
 - i. Over-allocation risks non-delivery and site stagnation.
 - ii. Ashdown Business Park expansion lacks evidence of deliverable demand.
 - iii. The strategy appears to be aspiration-led rather than demand-led.
 - c. **Not Consistent with National Policy (para 35(d))**
 - i. It does not clearly align with paragraphs 31, 82 and 85 requiring proportionate evidence and sector-specific justification and paragraphs 84–88 requiring an evidence-led employment strategy.
 - ii. It risks speculative provision contrary to the sustainable development framework in paragraphs 7–11.
 - iii. It lacks transport justification, relies on optimistic commuting-reduction assumptions and does not demonstrate infrastructure capacity, all being inconsistent with paragraphs 109–115.
 - iv. It would cause unjustified harm to environmental protection not justified by need and inconsistent with paragraphs 180–186.

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Strategic Employment Allocations Policy SS6 - Question 6

77. Policy SS6 relies on the flawed starting point of Policy SS5 and the purported need for at least 159,530 sq m of employment floorspace which is not justified.
78. WDLP states a need (Table 9 p100) for **47.8 ha/194,400 sq m** of employment floorspace allocated as 3.2 ha/16,100 sq m for offices and 44.6 ha/178,300 sq m industrial warehouse. These provisions are unsound for the reasons set out in respect of draft Policy SS5.
79. The Sustainability Appraisal January 2026 (SA) states that both Spatial Options 3 and 4 substantially exceed total need by 135% (SA Part 1 NTS p 37) and 163% (SA Part 1 NTS p 39) respectively. The WDLP proposes that offices will be sited in town centres and are thus not material for Strategic Employment Allocations (SEA) which are out of town. So, the SEA's need only to address the industrial and warehouse sector purported need for 178,300 sq m.
80. The proposed allocation EMP1, Land at North Polegate, is limited to only 66,370 sq m (WDLP Policy SS6 p 104) whereas the Sustainability Appraisal identifies a larger site with a capacity of 87,000 sq m (see SA, Part 1, NTS, p 31/37/39, Table 7.1, Site 896/1510) reflecting planning application ref WD/2023/0260. This application remains undetermined.
81. That apart, these allocations, EMP1 to 4, are suitably located in the south of the District close to the Strategic Road Network of the A27 and the town centre, facilities and public transport infrastructure of Eastbourne.
82. It is not appropriate to make another such Strategic Employment Allocation close to Maresfield, the High Weald National Landscape and the Ashdown Forest for the reasons set out in full in respect of the Spatial Strategy, Policy SS5 and Option OEMP4 for the Ashdown Business Park Expansion.

OEMP4 Ashdown Business Park – Maresfield.

83. **Background** – A planning application was submitted in December 2022 proposing development of the site. This application received some **660 objections** from statutory consultees, Parish Councils, community groups and members of the public. Fletching Parish Council has set out a full case against residential development of the site in response to the planning application ref WD/2022/3319/MEA. This is set out as **Appendix 1** (page 30 below).
84. When the site was suggested in the WDLP Reg 18 2024, it was again the subject of substantial objections – **some 700 objections**.
85. **Evidence base** - The various elements of the evidence base put forward in justification of OEMP4 are incoherent, inconsistent, and self-contradictory. Indeed, there is no specific analysis at all of the precise site proposed in OEMP4.
86. In addition, WDLP Table 11 (p 106) fails to identify all relevant issues for assessment.
87. **Scale and Extent of the Allocation** - It is significant that the SA Part 3 Strategic Site Assessments (p 49) omits that part of the Oakwood Park Site 980/3120 abutting the A22 in respect of which retail proposals have been suggested. There is no acknowledgement or assessment of any retail in this location but out of town retail in this location would clearly be unjustified, inappropriate, contrary to town centre first national policy and have a further adverse impact of Uckfield Town Centre.
88. There is a clear anomaly in the WDLP analysis. To the extent that any quantum is placed against the Ashdown Business Park Expansion, a figure of 60,000 sq m is drawn from planning application WD/2022/3319/MAO based on an application site area of 30.91 ha. Yet the site analysis as illustrated in SA Jan 2026 Part 3 (p 49) and SHEELA 2026 Appendix 1 p 641 (Site 980/3120), is stated to be 38.95 ha. Site 980/3120 includes the whole of the planning application area plus 8.04 ha of the Oakwood Park site. The entirety of the Oakwood Park site is 11.34 ha (SHEELA 2026 Appendix 1 p 639 Site 918/3120).
89. Thus, it is incoherent to suggest an allocation of 60,000 sq m on a combined site of 42.25 ha as assessed in the SA and the SHEELA, which is 37% larger than the application site. If the 2026

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Study assumption of 40% density is assumed over 42.25 ha, that would equate to potential development of 169,000 sq m across the combined sites which would be a vast development and greater than the combined total of all sites allocated under draft Policy SS6. Alternatively, Oakwood Park (11.34 ha) developed at 40% density equates to some 45,000 sq m of floorspace. Even if combined only with the current 60,000 sq m at ABPE, the total still amounts to 105,000 sq m of floorspace in one location.

90. This is another example of how excessive development is potentially being enabled without transparency and accuracy. This is particularly relevant given that Oakwood Park is also being promoted for development as evidenced by the Screening Opinion sought for development of employment land reference WD/2022/6507/SO.
91. **WDLP Site Assessment** - The SHEELA 2026 Appendix 1 p 641 (Site 980/3120), ABPE/Oakwood Park confuses the analysis further. The analysis lists critical constraints. These include the site being a remote rural site, sensitivity of the landscape, impact on irreplaceable Ancient Woodland abutting the site, proximity to sewage works, lack of sustainable transport options, and it being High Risk Flood Zone 3. This last matter is especially serious given the lack of any borehole, hydrological or other survey to assess the interaction between the longstanding PFAS contamination risk and local and regional hydrology, rivers and watercourses particularly in context of the current and escalating high flood risk.
92. The SHEELA 2026 concludes that the entire combined site, ABPE/Oakwood Park is **“not deliverable or developable”**.
93. The SHEELA 2026 Appendix 1 p 637 Site 720/3120 in respect of Land at Batts Bridge Field concludes again that this northern element of ABPE is **“not deliverable or developable”**.
94. The SHEELA 2026 Appendix 1 p 639 Site 918 /3120 in respect of Land at Oakwood Park concludes again that this site is **“not deliverable or developable”**.
95. The WDLP Maresfield Site Allocations Options Plan then shows the OEMP4 Option site aligned with the planning application site area. Yet the SHEELA 2026 fails entirely to consider the specific OEMP4 Option and in so far as the SHEELA addresses any land forming part of OEMP4, such land is rejected by the SHEELA 2026.
96. The Sustainability Appraisal makes clear that Oakwood Park as a whole should be rejected (SA Jan 2026 Part 2 p80 ref 918/3120) because, amongst other things, **“in landscape terms the area is of high sensitivity to large scale commercial/industrial development due to its open visual character, with intermittent clear views into the site from both the A272 and A22, and the public right of way. Aside from the Ashdown Business Park, there is little development within this area and on the site. Development of the quantum proposed would represent a significant encroachment into the countryside landscape in this location.”**
97. The SA also fails to support Land at Batts Bridge Field (SA Jan 2026 Part 2 p 80 ref 720/3120) stating **“whilst the proposed development could be seen as an extension to the Ashdown Business Park (for which the planning application has been submitted but yet to be determined), this is a significant quantum of floorspace in a countryside location and on a site which has an open visual character and intermittent clear views in from both the A272, A22 and PROWs. It may have an adverse impact on the countryside and landscape in this location, and this would need to be considered in terms of mitigation. An appropriate vehicular access from the A272, or from the adjoining Ashdown Business Park would be required. There is no safe pedestrian access along the A272 until the road is alongside the Ashdown Business Park, and no access to cycle infrastructure. Further information would be required.”**
98. The SA (Part 3 Strategic Site Assessments p 50) then assesses the combined ABPE/Oakwood Park Site 980/3120. The reasons for rejection of Oakwood Park in the SA Part 2 apply equally to the whole of the Ashdown Business Park Expansion/Oakwood Park site shown in the SA Part 3.

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99. So, the analyses of Sites 980/3120 in Part 3 and 918/3120 in Part 2 are wholly inconsistent. The SA 2026 fails entirely to consider the specific OEMP4 Option and in so far as the SA addresses any land forming part of OEMP4, such land is not supported by the SA.
100. In the light of all the evidence and the objections and issues raised in respect of the planning application which remain unresolved three years after submission, it is clear that the assessment and classification of impacts set out in the SA Part 3 Strategic Site Assessments (p 51/2) are misleading and wrong.
101. The SA further concludes that **“cumulative impacts will need to be considered in more detail at the next stage with regard to Transport, Landscape & Townscape, Contamination & Pollution in relation to adjacent proposals which have already been approved and new evidence.”**
102. Yet the WDLP in respect of OEMP4 (p 106 Table 11) only makes reference to PFAS implying that other issues identified in the SHEELA 2026 and the SA have been addressed and are now resolved. This is self-evidently not the case since no further work has been undertaken in respect of the planning application since first submission nor has any further work been undertaken to the evidence base.
- 103. Relevant Issues** – Thus more detailed consideration of the relevant issues is required as set out below.
104. **PFAS** - The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) is a legally binding part of the Environment Act 2021.
- a. The Government’s announcement on 3rd February 2026 is highly material, proposing a new plan better to protect the nation and the environment from harmful ‘forever chemicals’. In the first-ever PFAS Plan, a clear framework sets out the coordinated action that will be undertaken by governments, businesses and regulators to understand where these chemicals are coming from, how they spread and how to reduce public and environmental exposure.
 - b. This PFAS Plan sets out a range of regulatory and non-regulatory interventions, measures and initiatives with specific actions and delivery milestones. These will (a) raise understanding and awareness of PFAS in the environment, (b) identify and address releases of harmful PFAS and (c) protect people and the environment from harm relating to PFAS exposure. The Plan will set out a coordinated response, extending across government and industry.
 - c. Decades of firefighting training using Aqueous Film-Forming Foam (AFFF), a fire suppression agent containing per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and other older PFAS chemicals on the Ashdown Business Park means that there is a high risk of PFAS contamination on surrounding land including the proposed Ashdown Business Park Extension. Fire academies in particular have discharged large quantities of AFFF, specifically in the completion of practice drills designed to simulate fuel-based fires and emergency response scenarios. Over many years of training (in the case of the Ashdown Business Park since at least the 1950’s), these activities have resulted in the continuous discharge of AFFF directly into the soil and groundwater surrounding these facilities. Unlike fires in controlled environments, training exercises often produce uncontrolled releases of foam, amplifying environmental contamination.
 - d. No comprehensive borehole, hydrological or other surveys and analyses of land around the Fire Training Facility on the Business Park have been undertaken in order to understand the extent of any such contamination and the risk of such contamination being released through any groundwork, especially into an area of High Flood Risk, with the highly sensitive water ways and ecosystems nearby.
 - e. There is a particular risk around the Business Park due to the soil being mainly clay which is especially difficult to deal with.

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- f. PFAS is both airborne and waterborne. Thus, the gradient and topography of the land around the Business Park increases the risk of airborne PFAS spreading onto land and into watercourses. This increases the risk of bio accumulation in plants and other elements of the local ecosystem.
 - g. The strategic PFAS issue is a major national and international challenge which, to date, has yet to be resolved. The methods of attempting mitigation are still in the course of scientific and research development. Hence the work is being undertaken by Defra and the Environment Agency and other national governments around the world. The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, a global environmental treaty adopted in 2001, came into force in 2004. The Convention is an international agreement designed to eliminate or restrict the production and use of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) — chemicals that: persist in the environment; bioaccumulate in humans and wildlife; travel long distances globally; and pose risks to human health and ecosystems.
 - h. Several specific PFAS are regulated under the Convention.
 - i. No proper surveys have been carried out to assess the risks to people, wildlife, groundwater, or the River Ouse and its tributaries and feeder streams. These uncertainties create serious environmental and reputational risks.
 - j. The Environment Agency have expressed specific concern about this issue in the letter dated 17th May 2023 in response to the planning application WD/2022/3319/MAO.
 - k. Whilst the PFAS issue remains unquantified and unresolved, there can be no question of allocating any land around the existing Ashdown Business Park.
 - l. Given the PFAS contamination's unknown risk and potential long-term consequences, it is highly unlikely that the site, even if allocated, would be deliverable to the property development and investment market at all. The market is likely to shun such a site. It is noteworthy that the 2026 Study fails entirely to consider this exceptionally high-risk issue for market demand and delivery.
105. **Suitability of Location and Transport Infrastructure** - The location is unsustainable in every sense.
- a. Not only is the site entirely remote from adequate public transport services, but it is also entirely remote from the Strategic Road Network A&M23/A21/A27/M25. The expanded Business and Retail Park would be of regional scale sited in a mainly rural area, remote from local services and facilities. As stated in the SHEELA 2026 p 641 this **“is a relatively isolated rural site, remote from local services and facilities and visually and functionally separated from the village of Maresfield”**. It would be served only by the single carriageway congested roads of the A272 and A22 which run through local villages. The location of a Regional Facility at the rural village of Maresfield cannot be justified as the site is not near the Strategic Road Network nor any major population centres in Sussex, Kent or the South East. The road and rail infrastructure to service such a Facility is wholly inadequate. No credible and deliverable sustainable transport options, vision-led or otherwise, have been identified. The train service from the end of the line Uckfield Station to London is slow and infrequent. The result is that the majority of people drive to Haywards Heath Station, which has a far more frequent and flexible service. This will inevitably result in increased traffic flows along the A272.
 - b. The congestion on the A272 and A22 has become much worse since the Business Park evolved into a mixed retail, leisure and business park for Marks and Spencer, Home Bargains, Premier Inn and Costa, which generate so much traffic that nearby roads and roundabouts are often blocked with queues. Even minor road works cause major tail backs.
 - c. Draft NPPF (2025) Policy TR3 promotes the use of the Government Connectivity Tool to test how sustainable any given location is. The Tool shows that the Business Park has poor connectivity; there is no evidence of a credible and deliverable vision-led transport strategy.

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- d. The Council to date has used net out commuting patterns as at 2011 Census (28%). Today these patterns have very substantially reduced post-Covid and in consequence of behavioural change. Placing a centre of employment of regional scale and catchment out of centre in the middle of a rural district with no meaningful public transport accessibility is the antithesis of 21st century spatial planning that, on the face of it, would be in direct conflict with well-established national policy.
 - e. There would be severe transport related impacts. The development at this location, remote from public transport infrastructure, would lead inevitably to unsustainable, high Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emitting, road-based travel patterns. This is acknowledged in the SHELAA 2026 (p 641). It is wholly unrealistic to conclude that “sustainable travel options” can be created for a regional scale industrial/warehouse park¹ (which, as a matter of national policy and the local evidence base, will exclude town centre uses including retail and offices).
106. **Need** – The critical appraisal of the Employment and Economic Study 2026 clearly demonstrates that there is neither demand nor need for the quantum of floorspace proposed nor for a development in this location.
- a. The WDLP has already allocated enough land without the ABP Extension to provide all the jobs required for the future projected population, even assuming 1,457 dwellings p.a. over the life of the Plan can be achieved.
 - b. The proposal at Ashdown Business Park is quite simply not needed as is clearly demonstrated by the analysis in response to draft Policy SS5.
 - c. The unjustified overprovision of excessive employment land, if taken up, would lead to a substantial increase in transregional in-commuting to the District. This would exacerbate transport congestion and GHG emissions.
 - d. Neither is there any nationally significant reason to allocate this site. The Government promotes clusters, networks and sites for knowledge and data-driven, creative or high technology industries. Unlike the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, there are no such clusters in or close to Uckfield.
 - e. The Government promotes storage and distribution operations at a variety of scales and in **suitably accessible locations** that allow for the efficient and reliable handling of goods, especially where this is needed to support the supply chain (including ‘last mile’ deliveries), transport innovation and decarbonization. Again, this objective is not relevant to Uckfield, and the location is exceptionally poor for road-based storage and distribution.
 - f. The Government also promotes the expansion or modernisation of other businesses of regional or national importance to support economic growth and resilience. Once again there are no businesses of such importance in or near Uckfield.
 - g. Specific national policy deals with freight and logistics. To support the effective and efficient movement of goods, development proposals for freight and logistics uses and associated infrastructure should have **good access to transport networks (including via sustainable transport modes where possible)** appropriate to the type of development. Again, Ashdown Business Park is nowhere near the Strategic Road Network, unlike for example Tunbridge Wells, Eastbourne, Brighton or Crawley.
 - h. The increasing retail function of the Park is having a material adverse impact on Uckfield Town Centre.
 - i. The Wealden Town Centres Study January 2026 (para 5.32) finds that there has been a reduction in convenience expenditure, (-1.7%), in Wealden’s market share, and a reduction of in-centre market share (-4.3%). **“This speaks to the beginning of a negative trajectory in both cases, away from centres, and away from the District...The decline in in-centre**

¹ East Sussex County Highways objection letter dated 27th February 2023 WD/2022/3319/MAO

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spending could be attributed to multiple different factors including the addition of a new out of centre Marks and Spencer store outside of Uckfield Town Centre.”

- j. No full assessment of retail viability and vitality of Uckfield High Street has been undertaken since the trading of Marks and Spencer and Home Bargains became established. Vacancy rates alone are an incomplete, and only short term, indicator of vitality since some retailers are locked into premises for as long as their existing leases last. Thus, the harm to the High Street would emerge only over a period of years. The existing indicators of lack of footfall and decline include the rate of loss of banks, as well as the prevalence of charity shops, coffee shops and nail bars discussed above.
107. **Environment** - To develop the ABP Extension as proposed at this site would come at the cost of substantial, disproportionate and seriously harmful impacts on ecology and the environment.
- a. There are large areas of Ancient Woodlands and other irreplaceable ecosystems, in and around the proposed ABP Extension which would be harmed.
- b. The site is only 3 km from the protected Ashdown Forest. The very substantial increase in vehicle and GHG emissions would have a serious adverse effect impact. The Biodiversity Opportunity Area centred on the Forest covers the OEMP4 site. Sensitive ecosystems and watercourses would be harmed and the Nature Recovery Network prejudiced. The High Weald Ouse Catchment Landscape would be substantially harmed.
- c. **Geodiversity and Nature Recovery in the High Weald, Natural England, June 2024 Report** is the first national Case Study commissioned by Natural England to illustrate the benefits and value of integrating geodiversity into nature recovery, using the High Weald of Sussex and Kent as an example. The Report covers the whole of the High Weald but, in order to provide a more detailed analysis, focuses in particular on a local study area between Ashdown Forest and Uckfield, in East Sussex.
- d. Nature recovery forms the centrepiece of the Government’s approach to improving the quality of the natural environment, as part of the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP25). The plan promotes the establishment of a Nature Recovery Network (NRN) and a series of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) throughout the country.
- e. The Report’s Case Study concludes (p 52/3) that, across the High Weald as a whole, opportunities for geodiversity to contribute to (and for geodiversity value to benefit from) nature recovery initiatives have been identified in relation to each of the geological formations and associated landscape units.
- f. The local study area between Uckfield and the Ashdown Forest (which specifically addresses Ashdown Business Park Expansion and Oakwood Park) has enabled these and other opportunities to be explored in much greater detail. Specific opportunities have been identified within that area. Designations, Features, Habitats and Opportunities within the suggested Nature Recovery Corridor are shown on page 63 of that study.
- g. The WDLP documentation entirely fails to acknowledge, or to assess the implications of, this important study.
- h. Thus, the adverse environmental impacts of the proposed allocation would include rendering the opportunity for this part of the proposed Western Ouse Streams and Ashdown Forest Biodiversity Opportunity Area meaningless, given substantial adverse impacts on: -
- i. Ancient Woodland, including Calves Shaw and Park Wood² (noting particularly the Downlands Farm planning appeal decision)^{3,4},

² Extensive history including seventeenth century mapping

³ Appeal Ref: APP/C1435/W/23/3321978 Land at Downlands Farm, Uckfield, TN22 3PU

⁴ Forestry England objection letter dated 15th March 2023 WD/2022/3319/MAO

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- ii. sensitive water courses (Shortbridge Stream and Batts Bridge Stream) leading to the River Ouse, ghylls and irreplaceable habitats ^{5, 6},
 - iii. biodiversity including protected and other fauna,
 - iv. fragmentation of the biodiversity corridors across the site, for example between the areas of Ancient Woodland around the edges of the site,
 - v. the implementation, and success, of the Nature Recovery Network and the emerging East Sussex Local Nature Recovery Strategy 2026.
- i. Other adverse impacts include: -
- i. Depletion of valuable and vulnerable ecosystem services including carbon sequestration,
 - ii. harm to the High Weald Ouse Catchment Landscape by virtue of high^{7,8} sensitivity to commercial/industrial development, and given the absence of relationship with the existing settlement edges, which increases sensitivity⁹,
 - iii. harm to dark skies¹⁰,
 - iv. harm to tranquillity of rural areas^{11, 12},
 - v. exacerbated flood risk from runoff and loss of ground water storage and loss of attenuation services,
 - vi. loss of agricultural land,
 - vii. potential release of PFAS and other pollution^{13,14} into watercourses of particular sensitivity. No publicly available Site Risk Assessment or dialogue with the Environment Agency have been undertaken. The test for a planning application must also apply to any allocation i.e. “*WDLP (2024) Para 6.204 Planning permission will only be granted when it can be clearly demonstrated that the development can proceed as proposed without causing pollution to controlled waters, including groundwater; harm to the natural environment and biodiversity or pose significant risks to human health as a result of land contamination or instability*”.
108. Taken together, the allocation presents a clear failure against the tests of soundness in NPPF para 35 and represent multiple substantive policy conflicts throughout the Framework including para 31 – proportionate evidence; para 35(b)(c)(d) – soundness; paras 165–176 – flood risk; para 189 – contamination & land suitability; paras 109–115 – sustainable transport; paras 90–98 – town centre protection (if retail enabled); paras 180–187 – biodiversity & Ancient Woodland; and paras 159–164 – climate change
109. **Overall Soundness Conclusion** - OEMP4 is **unsound** under paragraph 35 of the NPPF 2024 because it is:

⁵ Forestry Commission objection letter dated 15th March 2023 WD/2022/3319/MAO

⁶ Woodland Trust objection letter dated 3rd March 2023 WD/2022/3319/MAO

⁷ Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Residential and Employment Development Final report Prepared by LUC November 2023, High Weald Ouse Catchment Wider LCA 6D, page LUC 124 and Figure 3.3

⁸ Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Renewable Energy Development Final report Prepared by LUC February 2024 Figure 3.5. Solar farm development of 20 ha has as much impact as the proposed Business Park Expansion.

⁹ Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Residential and Employment Development Final report Prepared by LUC November 2023 p LUC I B-258

¹⁰ Wealden Landscape Character Assessment, Prepared by LUC, May 2022, Figure 3.12

¹¹ Wealden Landscape Character Assessment, Prepared by LUC, May 2022, Figure 3.11

¹² Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Residential and Employment Development Final report Prepared by LUC November 2023 p LUC I B-258

¹³ Environment Agency objection letter dated 17th May 2023 WD/2022/3319/MAO

¹⁴ Cf WDLP Regulation 18 2024 Policy NE14

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- a. **Not justified** – the proposed allocation is contradicted by the Council’s own evidence; and there is no proven need.
- b. **Not effective** – serious contamination, flood risk and transport constraints undermine deliverability.
- c. **Not consistent with national policy** – the potential allocation conflicts with policies on ancient woodland, biodiversity, countryside protection, flood risk, contamination, sustainable transport and town centre vitality.
- d. **Not positively prepared** – the proposed allocation promotes unsustainable, excessive, regionally-scaled development in a rural location.

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Housing and Mixed Use Site Allocations Policy SA1 - Question 11

110. The allocation of **Land at Owlsbury Farm** (1,500 dwellings) in **WDLP Policy SA1** (p 151), Table 13 (p156), in **Policy LH1** (p183) and shown on the Site Allocations and Options Map for Uckfield and parts of Framfield and Little Horsted Parishes is not agreed and should be deleted.
111. This site has been assessed several times already.
112. **Background** - When the site was suggested in the WDLP Reg 18 2024, it was the subject of substantial objections - **some 750 objections**.
113. A planning application was submitted in April 2025 proposing development of the site. This application received **some 1,450 objections** from statutory consultees, Parish Councils, community groups and members of the public.
114. The **SHEELA 2024** (p 469) concluded that the Site (Reference: 1061/1410) was not suitable for residential use citing critical issues including Ancient Woodland, Flood Risk, unresolved functional separation from Uckfield, concerns over highway capacity impacts and lack of mitigation, landscape sensitivity, lack of infrastructure, and inability to achieve a genuine sustainable urban extension.
115. **Geodiversity and Nature Recovery in the High Weald, Natural England, June 2024 Report** is also entirely relevant to any consideration of Owlsbury Farm for all the reasons set out in relation to OEMP 4 above.
116. The WDLP documentation for Owlsbury Farm also entirely fails to assess the implications of this important study.
117. **WDLP Regulation 18 2024 Consultation** received a full response from Fletching Parish Council. The substantive reasons for objection remain entirely valid and indeed have been given further weight following the submission of a planning application (ref WD/2025/0922/MEA).
118. **Application WD/2025/0922/MEA** has enabled more detailed site specific scrutiny of the merit of the site for residential use. Fletching Parish Council has set out a full case against residential development of the site in response to the planning application ref WD/2025/0922/MEA. This is set out as **Appendix 2** (page 41 below). The substance of those objections are matters of principle and apply as much to the WDLP proposed allocation as to the specific planning application proposals.
119. It is significant, not only that some 1,450 individual objections from members of the public were lodged in response to that planning application, but also that responses from key statutory consultees raise critical questions about the delivery of sustainable development of the site.
- a. **Highways - 30/9/2025** - The Highway Authority raises fundamental concerns about (a) the scale and location of the development, (b) inadequate pre-application engagement, and (c) insufficient evidence that impacts on the A22 can be safely managed. Key issues include uncertain deliverability of access and crossings, non-compliant junction designs, loss of highway trees, weak active travel and public transport provision, conflicts with safeguarding a former railway line, and failure to demonstrate a genuinely sustainable, well-connected development.
 - b. **Water – 2/6/2025** -The response is largely generic and advisory. It explicitly states that it does not prejudice future assessments or commit to adoption, leaving uncertainty for delivery and reliance on later approvals. While foul capacity is stated as adequate at one manhole, there is no wider network modelling, resilience testing, or phasing assessment for a 1,700-dwelling scheme, especially given flood risk. The site is acknowledged to be in Flood Zone 2/3, but Southern Water defers responsibility to the LPA and Environment Agency, creating risk of late objections if mitigation proves insufficient. Adoption of SuDS is conditional and optional. Long-term maintenance responsibility is left to the developer, posing future management, viability, and enforceability risks. The response clearly rules out surface water connections to foul sewers but does not confirm a viable alternative strategy, which is critical on a flood-prone site.

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Restrictions near sewers could conflict with landscaping, biodiversity net gain, and SANG proposals, risking redesign late in the process.

- c. Southern Water does not serve the site for potable water, meaning a separate statutory undertaker, South East Water, must be engaged, increasing coordination and programme risk.
 - d. The response leaves major technical, flood, adoption, and phasing risks unresolved.
 - e. **Flood - 14/11/2025** - Parts of the wider site and surrounding land are areas of High Risk Flood Zone 3. There is a lack of analysis as the applicant failed to provide adequate information, calculation and analysis. Thus, the proposal was not acceptable.
 - f. **Ecology – 10/10/2025** - The advice makes clear that important information is required before a planning decision can be made. Critical gaps remain in respect of air quality, Ashdown Forest mitigation, drainage, hydrology, and green infrastructure. The assessment of Ancient Woodland is incomplete and impacts on irreplaceable habitats are considered unacceptable, including buffer encroachment and recreational pressure. Arboricultural data, BNG, tree and hedgerow records, and SANG baseline use need correction. Ecological evidence is insufficient for bats, dormice, birds, amphibians, reptiles, invertebrates, and invasive species, with surveys, licensing, and mitigation strategies lacking. Lighting, pets, and predator effects need review. Phasing, early delivery, and 30-year justification are unclear, and delays to mitigation provision remain unresolved¹⁵.
 - g. **Heritage – 1/12/2025** - The proposal would cause harm to a substantial number of heritage assets. The harm would result from the urbanisation of the setting of the assets and consequential erosion of the ability to appreciate the assets within a rural context.
 - h. **Arboriculture 27/10/2024** - The proposal conflicts with national and local policy, guidance, and best practice, causing harmful environmental impacts. These include encirclement, fragmentation, and isolation of irreplaceable ancient woodland, insufficient buffering, and poor siting of development and SANG near sensitive habitats. Opportunities for habitat restoration and ecological network enhancement are missed, alongside significant loss of priority habitats, particularly important hedgerows.
120. **Despite these fundamental unresolved issues, SA Part 3 Strategic Site Assessments** concludes (p 64) that Owlsbury Farm (Site 1061/1410) should be selected for allocation.
121. Two points arise. The first is that the assessment fails either adequately or at all to address all the issues raised by objectors and statutory responses to the planning application submitted which remain entirely unresolved.
122. Secondly, it is clear, given WDC's decision not to make an unconditional allocation of the site in the WDLP, that there are serious unresolved issues and that the assessment in the SA is inadequate and its conclusion unfounded.
123. Nevertheless, **SHEELA 2026 Appendix 1** p 614 (Site 1061/1410) finds, in stark contrast to the conclusion of SHEELA 2024 and its predecessors, that the site is developable whilst failing to engage with the fundamental issues of principle raised by the planning application and consultee responses.
124. Quite apart from all these issues, there are other critical reasons why the allocation is not justified.
- a. **Breach of the A22 Bypass defined urban boundary and the Scale of Owlsbury**
 - i. The proposed allocation represents a substantial and unjustified expansion of development beyond the A22, which has historically formed a strong, long term and defensible settlement boundary. Development on this scale would constitute a disjointed settlement pattern

¹⁵ Fletching Parish Council note that these concerns apply as a matter to principle as much to a local plan allocation as to a planning application, given the sensitivity of the site.

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“jumping” the A22 and eroding the distinction between the urban centre of Uckfield and the surrounding countryside.

- ii. When considered cumulatively with other proposed developments west of the A22 in the wider Ashdown Forest area, the scale of Owlsbury Farm is disproportionate and would fundamentally alter the spatial strategy of the District. The proposal effectively creates a new unsustainable settlement detached from Uckfield rather than a sustainable extension of it.

b. Unsustainable Location and Lack of Integration with Uckfield

- i. Owlsbury Farm is not a sustainable location for development of this scale. The site is poorly integrated with Uckfield and is too remote from the town centre to enable convenient access to key services, employment, retail, and leisure facilities by walking or cycling.
- ii. A brief review of Owlsbury Farm’s location shows that the site is remote and disconnected from the existing Uckfield settlement, being west of the A22 (the centre of the site is some 2km from the Uckfield Railway Station even as the crow flies and yet further from the main town centre facilities and services), extends into open countryside and is a randomly large site area driven merely by ownership.
- iii. The distance from Uckfield town centre, physical severance caused by the A22, and the lack of attractive, safe, and direct pedestrian and cycle routes mean that future residents would be unlikely to rely on active travel to reach town centre services on a day-to-day basis. As a result, the development would function largely as a disconnected car-served settlement rather than an integrated part of Uckfield. It is not credible or justifiable to suggest that the proposal would “consume its own smoke”. Residents would leave the site for a host of reasons including shopping, social life, secondary school, and so forth.
- iv. If a resident is to be encouraged to **choose** local active travel, a good selection of attractive, appealing, safe, convenient and easily navigable routes needs to be available. Many of the walking routes depend on the completion of the Ridgewood Farm development which has only completed some 250 of the permitted 1000 dwellings over a decade. There can be no confidence that the Ridgewood Farm routes will be delivered in reasonable time. The Copwood Roundabout will be a major 4-arm junction when the solar farm/charging facility is open, which young and old would have to navigate. Construction lorries would be using the A22 for many years. Active Travel routes into Uckfield would run through, and beside, industrial estates.
- v. If, as expected, the rate of build at Owlsbury Farm reflects the low, locally based, market demand for Ridgewood, then Owlsbury would take up to 60 years from today to complete. This time period casts real doubt on the credibility of delivering a viable and fundable bus service until after many years. By then, habits of car use would be well established.
- vi. The cycle route north along the A22 would not be an attractive cycle route even if the road speed were to be reduced to a maximum of 50 mph. There would be spray and fumes.
- vii. Underpasses are unattractive for pedestrians and likely to be subject to winter flooding.
- viii. Furthermore, the Transport for the South East SIP Factsheet 17 states: - “**N18 A22 Uckfield Bypass Dualling Online - dualling of the A22 Uckfield Bypass. Increase road safety and improve journey time reliability through the area. Short term.**” ESCC Report to Cabinet on 29th September 2022 confirms support for this proposal. The proposal is reconfirmed in East Sussex Fourth Local Transport Plan Appendix B: List of schemes presented in theme maps. The proposal is repeated in ‘Focused’ Draft Wealden Local Plan (Regulation 18) Infrastructure Delivery Plan – “**Dualling and improvements the A22 Uckfield Bypass works have been identified in East Sussex County Council’s Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4), which will aim to improve traffic flow, increase future capacity and enhance road safety.**”

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- ix. So, the severance between Owlsbury Farm and Uckfield will be even greater in the future. Yet this issue has not been addressed **at all** either in the current planning application or in the WDLP, the SA or the SHEELA. The current walking routes into Uckfield across the single carriageway A22 would require 3 signal controlled crossing points on the A22 which would have a substantial effect on increasing congestion. Once the A22 is dualled the walking and cycling routes will be even worse.
- x. This proposal conflicts with national and local planning objectives to focus growth in locations that reduce the need to travel, support existing town centres, and promote sustainable patterns of development. Draft NPPF Policy TR3 promotes the use of the Government Connectivity Tool to test how sustainable any given location is. The Tool shows that Owlsbury Farm has poor connectivity; there is no evidence of a credible and deliverable vision-led transport strategy.
- xi. The Owlsbury Farm proposal will not support Uckfield becoming a compact 20-minute neighbourhood and as such is in conflict with the strategic aim for Uckfield¹⁶.
- xii. The role of the landscape and countryside in preventing coalescence between Uckfield, Piltdown, Isfield and Little Horsted would be entirely undermined by a development of such a scale.
- xiii. The scale of land to be taken proposed is unjustified, particularly where development could be directed to less sensitive and more sustainable locations.

c. Traffic and Car-Borne Travel

- i. Due to its remote and poorly integrated location, Owlsbury Farm would be inherently car dependent. Residents would rely heavily on private vehicles for access to employment, healthcare, education, and town centre services.
- ii. Additional traffic would place further strain on the A22 and surrounding rural road network, which already experiences congestion and safety issues. The WDLP lacks convincing evidence that these impacts can be adequately mitigated, particularly bearing in mind the cumulative impact of all permitted and allocated sites in and around Uckfield.
- iii. There are substantial highway capacity and access constraints to which no solution has been explored, let alone found.
- iv. There is no credible, funded and deliverable vision-led transport solution.

d. Water Supply

- i. It is well known that Wealden suffers from increasing water stress and unreliability in water supply. There has been a serious impact on investor confidence in the economy. Recently businesses have suffered substantial costs due to supply failure.
- ii. There is insufficient evidence that a development of this scale can be accommodated within existing or planned water supply infrastructure. No clear, deliverable strategy has been demonstrated to ensure a secure and sustainable supply without adverse impacts on the environment, including protected habitats.
- iii. Without firm commitments from the relevant water undertaker and a clear phasing strategy, the allocation is premature and unsound.
- iv. There should not be any definitive allocation while such an important issue is unresolved.

e. Sewerage and Wastewater Infrastructure

- i. Existing wastewater and sewerage infrastructure in the area is known to be constrained. There is no certainty that sufficient capacity can be provided in a timely manner to serve

¹⁶ DLP 2024 page 49 para 3.17

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1,500 dwellings, nor that any necessary upgrades would be delivered in advance of occupation.

- ii. The closest Wastewater treatment works (Wwtw) is the Uckfield Wwtw. This is on the A22, opposite the site. It is recorded as having spilled 71 times (672.2 hours) between 2021 and 2024 and 19 times for a total of 178 hours in 2024 (permit number A00534), discharging into the Ridgewood Stream, which is a tributary to the Uck. The Uck joins the Ouse nearby just north of Isfield. The permitted spills are generally accepted to be an underestimate of the actual spills, as there is no independent monitoring. There is also a cumulative impact on rivers as there are a number of spilling Wwtws up stream of the site and elsewhere in the River Ouse catchment (e.g. Newick).
- iii. Allocating a site of this scale without guaranteed wastewater solutions presents an unacceptable risk to public health and the environment.

f. Flood Risk

- i. The **Wealden Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Draft Report December 2025** states that, in and around Uckfield, surface water and fluvial flooding pose recurring risks.
- ii. The results of the Cumulative Risk Assessment show that the following catchments are considered at high risk of cumulative impacts: River Uck. Fluvial flood risk is most notable along the River Uck; groundwater flood risk is prevalent across the district, particularly in locations such as Uckfield.
- iii. This is particularly important for Wealden District as there are several watercourses within the area which have not achieved a good status, including the River Uck primarily due to diffuse pollution and levels of phosphate, zinc and lead.
- iv. Owlsbury Farm lies within a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone. Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs) are areas designated as being at risk from agricultural nitrate pollution. Nitrate levels in waterbodies are affected by surface water runoff from surrounding agricultural land entering receiving waterbodies. The level of nitrate contamination will potentially influence the choice of SuDS and should be assessed as part of the design process.
- v. Large parts of the site and the surrounding land are affected by surface water flooding, and large-scale development would significantly increase impermeable surfaces. This would exacerbate contaminated flood risk from runoff and loss of ground water storage. This raises concerns about increased flood risk both on-site and downstream. The River Ouse becomes tidal just south of the Rivers Uck/Ouse intersection increasing pressure on the River Uck.
- vi. The serious flooding across the site due to the River Uck and surface water runoff, for example as washed over the site during the winter of 2025/2026, shows the enormity of the issue.
- vii. This means that the proposed SANG would be cut off regularly from the housing by floods. The proposed SANG was wholly isolated from that part of the site east of the River Uck. Thus, for much of the winter, the proposed SANG would serve no function and would not divert resident and leisure impacts from Ashdown Forest. A flooded river in spate is dangerous.
- viii. The WDLP does not provide sufficient detail to demonstrate that flood risk can be safely managed without transferring risk elsewhere, particularly in the context of climate change.

g. Food Production and Loss of Farmland

- i. **The National Security Assessment, *Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security***, highlights the risks particularly faced by the UK due to ecosystem degradation or collapse and the challenge to the UK's food security.

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- ii. Owlsbury Farm comprises productive agricultural land. The permanent loss of such land to development is contrary to the need to safeguard food production and maintain resilient local farming systems.
- iii. The development proposed would also result in major loss of carbon sequestration within the agricultural land.

h. Medical, Social and Health Infrastructure

- i. There is no evidence that existing GP surgeries, dental practices, or wider health services have the capacity to absorb the population increase proposed by the allocations and permitted development in and around Uckfield even before allowance is made for 1,500 new homes (3,500 new residents) at Owlsbury. Services are already under significant pressure.
- ii. The WDLP does not identify secured funding, land, or delivery mechanisms for new or expanded health and social facilities for this part of the District.
- iii. Furthermore, across the wider District these pressures are self-evident and are likely to be exacerbated by additional demands such as in the Crowborough area.

i. Schools and Education Provision

- i. Local secondary schools are not readily accessible to Owlsbury, being sited the northern end of the town reached up a steep gradient. The walk is some 50 minutes from the A22 at the main Owlsbury site entrance. This is not an attractive route for active travel. A development of this size, especially when combined with the permitted development and other allocations proposed in the WDLP, would generate substantial additional demand for school places.
- ii. The Draft Plan does not demonstrate how sufficient education provision would be delivered in a timely manner or how land and funding for new school places would be secured.

j. Environment and Biodiversity

- i. The scale and location of the proposed development pose a clear threat to landscape character, irreplaceable Ancient Woodland, biodiversity, and ecological connectivity. Increased recreational pressure, noise, light pollution, and traffic would have indirect impacts on sensitive habitats in the wider area.
- ii. The WDLP does not provide adequate assurance that biodiversity net gain can be achieved and sustained for a development of this scale.
- iii. The issue of severance of the SANG from the proposed homes by flood has not been adequately addressed.
- iv. Contaminated flood water is harmful to the Ancient Woodland and SANG ecology.
- v. Any allocation would have substantial adverse impacts on:
 - 1. the numerous closely spaced pockets of Ancient Woodland and priority habitat deciduous woodland (noting in particular the Downland Farm planning appeal decision)¹⁷. The cumulative impact of the scale of the development cannot be mitigated by buffer zones between the pockets.
 - 2. sensitive water courses (River Uck) leading to the River Ouse, ghylls and irreplaceable habitats,
 - 3. biodiversity including protected and other fauna given the Biodiversity Opportunity Area (River Uck and its Headwaters) running north to south through the centre of the site,

¹⁷ Appeal Ref: APP/C1435/W/23/3321978 Land at Downlands Farm, Uckfield, TN22 3PU

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4. the Green Infrastructure of the Strategic Uck Valley Green Corridor¹⁸,
 5. Ashdown Forest (SAC and SPA) due to the proximity of the Forest within the 7km SPA Buffer Zone¹⁹,
 6. Uckfield to Hailsham Wooded Clay Vale Landscape Character Area by virtue of high²⁰ sensitivity to large scale development, and given the absence of relationship with the existing settlement edges,
 7. areas of historic medieval assart field patterns in the north and strong network of hedgerows and hedgerow trees,
 8. the network of public rights of way in the north²¹,
 9. the rural and tranquil setting to Uckfield, Piltdown, Isfield and Little Horsted and general tranquillity of rural areas^{22, 23},
 10. dark skies²⁴.
125. Taken cumulatively, the allocation fails the tests of soundness in NPPF para 35 and conflicts with multiple substantive provisions of the Framework including paras 15–24 31–35 (soundness, alternatives and evidence base); paras 104–106 (sustainable transport, reducing the need to travel and location of growth); paras 165–175 (flood risk); paras 180–188 (natural environment and ancient woodland); paras 200–208 (heritage); para 187(b) (agricultural land); paras 20 & 22 (infrastructure and deliverability) and paras 7–14 (presumption in favour of sustainable development).
126. **Overall Soundness Conclusion** – The Owlsbury Farm allocation is unsound because it is:
- a. **Not justified** – it contradicts earlier SHELAA findings and ignores unresolved statutory objections and strategic nature recovery evidence. There is inadequate assessment of alternatives and environmental harm.
 - b. **Not effective** – unresolved highways, flood risk, wastewater, SANG, and infrastructure constraints undermine deliverability.
 - c. **Not consistent with national policy** – the proposal conflicts with policies on ancient woodland, biodiversity, flood risk, sustainable transport, countryside protection, heritage, and agricultural land.
 - d. **Not positively prepared** – the proposal promotes a detached, car-dependent settlement inconsistent with sustainable spatial planning principles and a development in a location that does not clearly represent sustainable development.

¹⁸ Wealden Green Infrastructure Study 2017 Figure 5.1, Box 5.3, Figure 5.3

¹⁹ DLP 2024 Reg 18 Figure 20

²⁰ Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Residential and Employment Development Final report Prepared by LUC November 2023, Uckfield to Hailsham Wooded Clay Vale LCA 3A Fig 1.1 and Fig 3.3

²¹ Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Residential and Employment Development Final report Prepared by LUC November 2023 p LUC I B-163

²² Wealden Landscape Character Assessment, Prepared by LUC, May 2022, Figure 3.11

²³ Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Residential and Employment Development Final report Prepared by LUC November 2023 p LUC I B-163

²⁴ Wealden Landscape Character Assessment, Prepared by LUC, May 2022, Figure 3.12

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APPENDIX 1

WD/2022/3319/MAO Ashdown Business Park, Michael Way, Maresfield TN22 2DU

Extension of Ashdown Business Park into land to the west, providing for up to 60,000m² of gross internal floor area for class e(g) mixed use classes plus b2 and b8 with ancillary storage and office use.

The Parish Council STRONGLY OBJECTS to this application for the following reasons.

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Parish Council fully recognises the strategic requirement to have an evidence-based, planned and managed strategy at District and County levels for future employment land and for the provision of modern, low or zero carbon emitting, environmentally responsible, commercial buildings.
- 1.2 In this context, Fletching Parish Council (FPC) has carefully considered the planning application and strongly objects to this ad hoc, unplanned, opportunistic and premature development proposal with subregional implications, situated on the boundary of the Parish of Fletching for the reasons set out. The proposal is misleadingly referred to as Phase 2. A second phase has never been proposed in the development plan.
- 1.3 The applicant has failed to comply with well-established statutory requirements and good practice including in respect of public consultation and The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017. The application documentation is deficient and lacks critical survey and other data and analysis. The submission lacks binding parameters plans and design codes and the full essential analysis required, so as to enable the full implications of the proposal across all major areas of policy to be properly assessed.
- 1.4 As a matter of principle, planning permission should be refused. There is clear breach of the development plan Policies SPO1, SPO4, SPO7, SPO9, SPO10, SPO12, SPO13, SPO14, WCS1, WCS3, WCS4, WCS12, and WCS14 of the Core Strategy and Saved Policies GD2, EN1, EN2, EN8, EN27, BS10, and TR3 of the Local Plan.
- 1.5 The demonstrable adverse impacts include:
 - 1.5.1 loss of agricultural land, outside any development boundary, that has never been previously developed land;
 - 1.5.2 loss of the strategic gap between Maresfield/Uckfield and the rural hamlet of Piltdown;
 - 1.5.3 substantial harm to the landscape character of this part of the Low Weald;
 - 1.5.4 negating the properly planned and managed provision of, and assessment of all options (including through sequential preference) for, employment land across the District and around Maresfield and Uckfield;
 - 1.5.5 excessive provision of commercial land uses, substantially exceeding development plan provision to 2027 and lack of justification of mix especially out of centre offices in the absence of sequential testing;
 - 1.5.6 unjustified and unquantified impacts for climate change both in aggregate and specifically in respect of Ashdown Forest, without offset or remedy;
 - 1.5.7 exacerbating flood risk on site and downstream;
 - 1.5.8 substantial effects on the local highway network;
 - 1.5.9 an inappropriate design lacking a contextual approach and without any fixed definition in the absence of binding parameter plans and design codes; and

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1.5.10 substantial harm to biodiversity including protected species, fragile and rare ecosystems including springs and ghyll woodlands and the natural capital of the locality.

- 1.6 The application fails to identify other material planning considerations of sufficient weight to overcome the fundamental breach of development plan policy.
- 1.7 The planning application conflicts with the following paragraphs of the National Planning Policy Framework (amongst others) for the reasons set out in Appendix 1: 39, 126, 43, 49, 82, 88, 105, 113, 119, 120, 126, 130, 132, 135, 152, 174, 180.
- 1.8 Having regard to the National Planning Policy Framework, the evident adverse impacts of permitting the proposal would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits. Thus the proposed development does not constitute sustainable development and planning permission should be refused.
- 1.9 Given the lack of necessary information, further consultation will need to be undertaken in order that comments can be made once the application is complete, unless it is withdrawn now.
- 1.10 In the light of the inadequate consultation period in which to consider such a large application, the Parish Council reserves its position to make further comments on the application including as further information is submitted.
- 1.11 In its current form, the application cannot be lawfully permitted.

2. Validity

- 2.1 The application as submitted appears to be invalid due to the failure to comply with two statutory requirements:
 - 2.1.1 **Failure to consult** - As the WDC Statement of Community Involvement July 2020 states:- ***there is a statutory requirement for applicants or developers to carry out their own early consultation with the local community to inform the application process, as set out in the Localism Act 2011.*** No Statement of Community Involvement is included in the application. The applicant acknowledges the failure to comply with the statutory requirement and seeks to justify this on that grounds that ***legal sensitivities have prevented the scheme being promoted more widely to the public prior to its submission.*** In fact the applicant admitted on 6th February that the failure to consult was simply at the request of the landowners. The relevant legislation makes no provision for any such justification for a breach of the statutory requirement. Given that the application was submitted over the Christmas period, local communities have had wholly inadequate time to consider the complex implications of the proposal.
 - 2.1.2 Environmental Impact Assessment and other Regulations – The development site exceeds the 10 ha threshold set out in Schedule 2 of The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 (as amended). There appears to be no reference in the application documentation to the applicant having sought either a Screening Opinion in accordance with national guidance and neither is there any evidence of a Scoping Opinion having been sought. The statutory provisions apply yet the application does not consider the relevance nor apply the Regulations. Having regard to the provisions of Schedule 3 of the Regulations and the selection criteria for screening Schedule 2 development, it is clear that that the proposal constitutes Schedule 2 development and a full Environmental Statement in accordance with statutory and legal requirements and case law should have been submitted. Such an Environmental Statement is required to assess all relevant social, economic and environmental factors including cumulative effects of other permitted development and allocated sites. The applicant has submitted a document labelled “eEIA”. This does no

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more than address ecology and nature conservation resources within and surrounding land south-west of Ashdown Business Park. It is not a statutory Environmental Statement prepared in accordance with the Regulations, Guidance and case law.

- 2.2 The absence of any binding and enforceable parameter plans and design codes means that effective environmental assessment cannot be undertaken. The applicant has confirmed that all drawings are purely for illustrative purposes only and are thus merely images. The application, as submitted and if permitted, would allow development that is entirely different in all respects to be constructed. It is wholly inappropriate for the implementation of all aspects of a scheme of this scale to be left entirely uncertain. Such an application should be supported by binding parameter plans and sections and design codes that fix the key elements of the scheme within reasonable tolerances in respect of, for example, siting and height of buildings, principle movement corridors, areas of parking and areas of landscape. There are no enforceable design codes put forward. Such parameter plans and design codes are essential in order for an Environmental Impact Statement in accordance with the Regulations to be undertaken.
- 2.3 In addition, without such binding parameter plans and design codes, the design merit of the proposal cannot be adequately assessed. This is important given, for example, the sensitivity of the rural location (as referred to in the heritage assessment), the setting of listed buildings and the delicate ecosystem on and around the site including protected species, Ancient Woodland and rare ghyll woodlands. All that has been provided are illustrative drawings and CGIs.
- 2.4 The transport assessment does not appear to assess the full daily cumulative impact of the proposal across the local highway network.
- 2.5 This is essential in order to achieve proper assessment of impacts and to ensure that the key constitute elements of the scheme are delivered as indicated. If it is necessary to revise a proposal beyond any approved parameter plan, then the proper and usual approach is for a fresh application to be made.

3. Consideration of the Application

- 3.1 The starting point in considering this application is the relevant statutory provision which states: ***If regard is to be had to the development plan for the purpose of any determination to be made under the planning Acts the determination must be made in accordance with the plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.***
- 3.2 The Planning Statement fails to assess, analyse and apply the specific relevant policies of the development plan that are relevant to the determination of the planning application; fails to identify the policies, if any, with which the proposal complies and, if so, why; and fails to identify those policies with which the proposal does not comply.
- 3.3 Given the evident breach of development plan policy, material planning considerations of substantial weight would need to be demonstrated in order to outweigh the planning application's clear conflict with the development plan. Only two material planning considerations, in respect of location and land use, appear to be identified in the Planning Statement's assessment of policy (firstly, Land and Premises Supply Study and, secondly, Pre-Application Consultation with Wealden District Council – reference PE/2020/0217/E dated 15th May 2020). Neither is assessed as to its specific relevance nor the weight to be given to each in arriving at a planning decision. We comment on each in turn.
- 3.4 Whilst the Wealden Local Plan Submission Draft January 2019 was withdrawn due conflict with the Duty to Cooperate, nonetheless the vision and spatial strategy and policy construct demonstrate the most recent thinking on planning policy and the direction of travel. Furthermore, the draft policy had been informed by a proper due process of public consultation.

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- 3.5 Land and Premises Supply Study - The Study explains that, whilst there is a shortage of employment land, the position is nuanced around the County, as some areas do at least have new high-quality space coming on stream, but the position in Hastings was described as being particularly acute (page 1). Uckfield is not described as suffering acutely albeit that Uckfield serves a different market to Hastings. The Study points out that the impact of the coronavirus has yet to be fully understood given the potential major loss of employment for example in Crawley (para 5.10).
- 3.6 In this context, it is noteworthy that the District Council was content to lose permitted and allocated commercial development land at Ashdown Business Park in favour retail development for Marks and Spencer (1,951 sq m food retail) and Home Bargains (1,858 sq m non-food retail) contrary to draft policy EC1 of the withdrawn Wealden Local Plan Submission January 2019. This decision underlines that there is no acute need for commercial floorspace at Maresfield.
- 3.7 Policy SD1 of the Core Strategy already provides for a strategic allocation of employment land at Ridgewood Farm, Uckfield of 12,650 square metres net employment floorspace which remains undeveloped.
- 3.8 The Study suggests (page 32, Table 4) that only 1 prime site of 10 acres (4 ha) may be required in Uckfield, if Ridgewood Farm is delayed - *It is noted that potential options exist along the A22 (our emphasis) on the edge of Uckfield if the Ridgewood Farm land does not come forward in this timeframe.* Yet the planning application site extends to some 77 acres (31 ha), over 7 times the size of the identified potential requirement and no other options have been examined.
- 3.9 The allocation of employment land should be undertaken on the basis of evidential analysis of demographics, employment creation, market demand for accommodation and thus required supply. This process was undertaken in the preparation of the Submission Plan 2019. The Draft Plan made a strategic allocation SWGA 29 at Hailsham for 22,500m² of employment floorspace. No allocation of additional allocation was proposed in Uckfield/Maresfield. The development plan makes no allocation on the application site and, notwithstanding that the proposal is thus contrary to the development plan, the Planning Statement does not provide any analysis to justify the location nor the quantum nor the mix of land uses that are proposed in the application. Furthermore, there is no cumulative analysis taking into account allocated land at Ridgewood Farm and the potential allocation at Oakwood Park to which reference is made in the Pre-Application Consultation Response (see below).
- 3.10 Rather the applicant has simply taken the land area which happens to be in one primary ownership and the subject of a promotion agreement and adopted a design led approach to maximise the development potential of this particular parcel of land.
- 3.11 Therefore, the Supply Study in itself does not justify the proposed size and location of the proposed development and is not a material consideration of sufficient weight to indicate that planning permission should be granted contrary to the development plan.
- 3.12 It is also significant that, in presenting the proposal at Fairwarp Village Hall on 30th January 2023, the applicant's agent stated that that only commercial uses were proposed "at this stage". This statement infers that potentially other uses including retail are being considered. This has already happened in the existing Business Park. The applicant's case purports to be predicated on providing commercial land to meet need yet is already contemplating non-commercial uses.
- 3.13 Pre-Application Consultation dated 15th May 2020 – the letter states that it is noted that the proposed development site forms part of the site that was submitted previously under the SHELAA. This statement is incorrect since the relevant map shows that the submitted SHELAA land (Report January 2019, para 6.34 table page 17 and p. 436 - parcel 918/3120)

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was at Oakwood Park (11.34 ha) and not the current planning application site which excludes Oakwood Park. The SHELAA assessments concluded in respect of Oakwood Park that this is a relatively isolated rural site, remote from public transport and from local services and facilities and visually and functionally separated from the village of Maresfield. Housing development would be unsustainable in this location and appear out of keeping with the attractive rural character and appearance of the countryside. Employment development may be suitable given the sites location on the A22 and adjacent to other employment uses. Suitable buffers would be required to protect and enhance the ancient woodland located adjacent to the eastern and western boundaries of the site. The site is within 7km of the Ashdown Forest SPA therefore if the site were to come forward for development it would require a Habitats Regulations Assessment. N.B. The SHELAA has been conducted in advance of decisions on the planning strategy in the WLP.

- 3.14 Whilst Oakwood Park has direct access from the A22, the planning application site does not. In addition Oakwood Park has been the subject of land raise and, unlike the application site, is not pure agricultural land. Therefore these comments in the pre-application response do not in any way justify the development of the application site and are irrelevant and of no weight.
- 3.15 The letter also refers to Core Strategy Policy SPO6 which states that in order to improve economic prosperity we will support the growth of the Wealden economy by helping existing companies to expand and develop. We will help improve the range of employment opportunities available and provide for an additional 40,000 sq. metres net of employment floorspace... Thus, the adopted Strategy provides for only 40,000 sq m of additional floorspace across the whole District over the Plan period up to 2027. Yet the current planning application now proposes 60,000 sq m in Uckfield alone with no analysis or justification or assessment of alternative sequentially preferable sites at all. The proposal merely seeks to maximise the development capacity of the application site.
- 3.16 Next, the letter argues that Policy BS9 supports the expansion of existing business sites and therefore applies this principle to the Ashdown Business Park and the current proposals to expand the Business Park. On a proper reading and construction of the reasoned justification preceding Policy BS9 relating to countryside and the rural economy, at paragraphs 7.46 to 7.49, it is evident that the policy applies to the conversion of former farm buildings to achieve diversification and expansion for small rural enterprises and other existing rural enterprises in the countryside, given that Policy GS2 resists new industrial and commercial development outside development boundaries. Therefore, Policy BS9 is not relevant in assessing the current planning application for the expansion of Ashdown Business Park.
- 3.17 In summary, a proper analysis of policy demonstrates that the Pre-Application Response does not justify the large scale commercial development at the proposed location nor the proposed land use, both of which are contrary to the development plan.
- 3.18 **Core Strategy** – The policy application is considered as follows:-
 - 3.18.1 SPO1 – the proposal fails to enhance the distinct landscape of this part of the District. The application site currently serves not only as agricultural land but also as part of a strategic gap and buffer maintaining a clear separation, and preventing any coalescence, between the rural Parish of Fletching, and in particular the historic rural setting of the hamlet of Piltdown, and the more urban settlement pattern of Maresfield and Uckfield. In addition to the urbanising effects of the introduction of large buildings, the proposed development will be highly illuminated during the night and winter months thereby starkly changing the character of the rural landscape. Noise will be generated including reversing sirens on large vehicles.

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- 3.18.2 SPO4 - the proposal does not represent planned and managed development of Uckfield. It undermines the principles established in 2019 and the proper assessment of employment land allocation through the local plan making process.
- 3.18.3 SPO6 – the proposal would substantially exceed the planned development of an additional 40,000m² across the District as a whole.
- 3.18.4 SPO7 - as the proposed development is not within a town centre nor close to integrated public transport infrastructure, and therefore will be primarily served by road transport, buildings primarily in office use would not be appropriate. There is no requirement for office space in this location. In any event, national policy states that offices should be provided in town centres near public transport interchange to avoid people driving to work. The site is far from Uckfield Railway Station and the town centre. Out of town office parks are a thing of the past.
- 3.18.5 SPO9 – the application does not address the issues of climate change adequately and does not contain sufficient analysis.
- 3.18.6 SPO10 – the flood risk is addressed in the application with historic Environment Agency mapping. It is quite clear from the recent effects of unprecedented levels of rainfall, in terms of amount and duration, that land across the District, including the application site, which has never flooded before is now subject to material flooding. A far more sophisticated analysis of flood risk is required. There is no assessment of the downstream increase in flood risk.
- 3.18.7 SPO12 – the issue of road safety across the network has not been sufficiently analysed. For example, there is no assessment of the implications on the A272 through places such as Piltdown and Newick especially in the light of the recent decision of ESCC not to reduce the speed limit in Piltdown to 30 mph and the 60-mph speed limit between Piltdown and Newick.
- 3.18.8 SPO13 – the proposals do not represent good design. The existing Business Park was specified to be low density and low rise (2 storeys). The current proposal is dense and certain buildings are high rise and wholly out of character with the locality. Given the lack of enforceable parameter plans and design code, the realities of the design are entirely undefined and unknown. Contrary to proper practice, both the landscape and heritage assessments have been undertaken using photographs taken in May last year when the trees were in full leaf. Any such applications should be supported with winter views analysis when the leaves have fallen so that the Zone of Visual Influence can be fully analysed. A similar point applies to assess the effects on the significance of the setting of listed buildings in accordance with the statutory duty.
- 3.18.9 SPO14 – the application site is not previously developed land. The 1947 RAF aerial photograph of Maresfield Army Camp²⁵ clearly shows that the application site formed no part of the Camp.
- 3.18.10 WCS1 - The proposed 60,000m² substantially exceeds the allocation for the plan period to 2027 of 40,000m² for the District as a whole and the combined allocations in Maresfield and Uckfield of 2019.
- 3.18.11 WCS 3 - only 12,650m² is allocated at Uckfield for the Plan period.
- 3.18.12 WCS4 – the proposed development would substantially exceed the allocation of SD1.

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:RAF_1947_aerial_view_of_Maresfield_army_camp.jpg#file

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- 3.18.13 WCS12 – the proposals include measures which, if implemented and maintained, may improve biodiversity. Such improvements could be achieved without the proposed built form.
- 3.18.14 The base line has yet to be established. For example, Ponds G and H have not been surveyed for Great Crested Newt, yet are only 100m from the application site and thus well within the 500m Impact Risk Zone buffer. As to bats, Calves Shaw is found to have 8 bat species and 30 potential roosting sites. The 2021/22 survey results have confirmed that there is a considerable amount of bat activity along the peripheral edges of the Site by up to eight species of bat present, albeit Serotine only being recorded as a single pass (para 4.4.9 eEIA). The site is adjacent to and part of highly sensitive watercourses. These particular woods and the land of the proposed development are at the extreme upper reaches of the river Ouse catchment. The springs that flow from this land enter Shortbridge stream which is a tributary into the river Ouse. This untouched wetland habitat is known as ghyll woodland. Ghyll woodlands are rare priority habitats, unique to the Weald of Southern England. They have fragile ecosystems and threatened species that pre-date the last ice age.
- 3.18.15 The Arboricultural Appraisal does not fully assess impacts on Ancient Woodland. For example, in respect of Calves Shaw West, the combined impact with Site 11 is not assessed. The report states (para 4.6) that the recommended buffer distance for Ancient Woodland will not be adopted, merely one of 11m. More fundamentally, recent national guidance “Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees: advice for making planning decisions” has not been followed. The guidance makes clear that 15 m buffer is a minimum starting point. Then other factors should be assessed such as damaging or destroying all or part of them (including their soils, ground flora or fungi); damaging functional habitat connections, such as open habitats between the trees in wood pasture and parkland; increasing levels of air and light pollution, noise and vibration; changing the water table or drainage; breaking up or destroying working connections between woodlands, or ancient trees or veteran trees - affecting protected species, such as bats or wood-decay insects; reducing the amount of semi-natural habitats next to ancient woodland that provide important dispersal and feeding habitat for woodland species; reducing the resilience of the woodland or trees and making them more vulnerable to change; increasing the amount of dust, light, water, air and soil pollution; increasing disturbance to wildlife, such as noise from additional people and traffic; increasing damage to habitat, for example trampling of plants and erosion of soil by people accessing the woodland or tree root protection areas; increasing damaging activities like fly-tipping; increasing the risk of damage to people and property by falling branches or trees requiring tree management that could cause habitat deterioration; and changing the landscape character of the area.
- 3.18.16 The Arboricultural Appraisal does not address these issues. The Assessment also fails to address tree loss due to the widening of the A272 and landscape buffer reduction by the Premier Inn.
- 3.18.17 WCS14 – The proposal does not constitute sustainable development in accordance with the policies of the Core Strategy; it would result in substantial and material adverse impacts including the unjustified loss of 77 acres (32 ha) of greenfield land; unjustified and excessive quantum of development, the case for which is not supported by any evidential analysis; and a scale and location of development which would breach the restriction of the Strategy’s specific quantitative allocation for Uckfield.
- 3.18.18 Furthermore, the adverse impacts of unplanned development of the application site would only be exacerbated further as the emerging Oakwood Park proposal is also

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being promoted. The cumulative impacts of the development of both sites, together with Ridgewood Farm, have not been considered and should be assessed fully through the plan making process which is not yet concluded. It may well be that, if there is to be any further planned and justified commercial development in the area, Oakwood Park is to be preferred to the application site. Indeed, the Submission Local Plan documents suggest an allocation at Maresfield of only 23,438m² some which could perhaps be accommodated at Oakwood Park. All these issues demonstrate precisely why the matter of employment land allocation should be addressed through the local plan process including full public consultation and engagement not through a planning application that contains no relevant analysis and that has not been the subject of proper public consultation across the District.

- 3.18.19 The Transport Assessment identifies that there are likely to be at least 808 two-way vehicle trips during peak hours alone. The Assessment does not assess the total number of trips per day generated by 3000 jobs. The proposed development would include 1,093 parking spaces. The Assessment does not address the impacts of total daily movements on the local highway network especially on the A272 in Piltdown, Maresfield and Newick.
- 3.18.20 The application makes no attempt to model the potential CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions that may be caused by the proposed development in construction and operation, neither is there any analysis or proposal as to how such emissions are to be offset.
- 3.18.21 All these major adverse impacts outweigh any perceived benefits of the proposal in terms of employment creation and biodiversity gain.
- 3.19 **Local Plan Saved Policies** – The proposed development would breach the following policies:-
- 3.19.1 GD2 – being situated outside development boundaries;
- 3.19.2 EN1 – failing to constitute sustainable development;
- 3.19.3 EN2 – failing to maintain the settlement pattern and in constituting major development that is not efficiently located in relation to existing development and public transport;
- 3.19.4 EN8 – failing to protect the agricultural character of this part of the Low Weald. Indeed the Landscape Appraisal only assesses the Zone of Theoretical Visibility with trees in leaf in summer (25th May 2022) – no winter assessment has been undertaken; the Appraisal described Park Wood as being Ancient Replanted Woodland where as the Woodland Trust confirms its designation thus: The wood has been woodland for at least 200 years according to historic maps. Now a Forestry Commission wood, it is not simply uniform plantation but has a variety of trees and woodland areas, rides and holloways and one can find streams and hidden ponds down some of the pathways. It is quiet and undisturbed and frequented as much by deer²⁶. The woodland boundary to the application site is not plantation but historic woodland;
- 3.19.5 EN27 – setting aside the objection to the principle of development, failing to respect the design principles of the policy and those of BS10, ie low scale, low rise, low density proposals. The applicant argues that only 60% of the site is developed. This figure is irrelevant to a full consideration of the impacts of the development. The layout shows 2 sites of very large buildings, larger than any in the existing Business Park. Furthermore, one of them is shown in the north-east corner of the

²⁶ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/woods/park-wood-high-wood/>

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site adjoining the A272. The building would have a very substantial and overbearing impact on the approach to the site along the A272 creating an extreme urbanising impact at a sensitive boundary condition. Neither the Design Statement nor the Landscape Appraisal include a complete set of verified CGIs of the proposed development in all relevant viewpoints. Thus, the application documentation does not allow the proposal to be fully assessed. Such assessment is critical if any parameter plans to be submitted in the application are to be properly judged;

- 3.19.6 The internal layout of the development in reality is dense with inadequate open spaces;
- 3.19.7 The boundary buffers are insufficiently wide to be effective, being only 30m, especially during the winter if planted with native deciduous species. The Woodland Trust normally propose 50 - 100 m. Any planting would need to be of mature and semi-mature trees and shrubs in order to prevent unacceptable impacts for 15 – 20 years whilst planting matures;
- 3.19.8 BS10 – being in breach of the parameters of the allocation of land for the Business Park development; and
- 3.19.9 TR3 – failing adequately to assess all the relevant transport impacts on the local highway network.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The proposed development is speculative and premature, in advance of the plan making process. The application documentation is incomplete, such as to render the application invalid; lacks adequate, reasonable and rigorous analysis of all relevant issues; and lacks critical content thus preventing proper appraisal of the proposed development's impacts.
- 4.2 Nonetheless there is sufficient information to demonstrate that the proposal is contrary to the development plan, as a matter of principle, and does not represent sustainable development. Thus, planning permission should be refused unless material planning considerations of sufficient weight indicate otherwise.
- 4.3 The applicant has not identified any such material considerations that justify a departure from the development plan.
- 4.4 Having regard to the National Planning Policy Framework, the demonstrable adverse impacts of permitting the proposal would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits.
- 4.5 The application is of more than local importance and conflicts with National Policy on important matters.

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Appendix 1

Assessment of application against National Planning Policy Framework

The application is assessed against the National Planning Policy Framework as follows:

1. The applicant has not pursued early engagement and frontloading of consultation with the local communities affected by the proposal (paras 39, 126).
2. The right information is crucial to good decision-making, particularly where formal assessments are required (para 43). The applicant has failed to provide a wide range of crucial information within the application.
3. This development proposed is self-evidently so substantial, and its potential 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 the emerging development plan (para 49).
4. To permit the development would prevent the ability of the District Council to set out a clear economic vision and strategy which positively and proactively encourages sustainable economic growth, having regard to Local Industrial Strategies and other local policies for economic development and regeneration (para 82).
5. As the proposed development would be an out of centre proposals, preference should be given to accessible sites which are well connected to the town centre (para 88) and sequential analysis of all options has yet to be undertaken. This would form part of the plan making process.
6. The planning system should actively manage patterns of growth in support of the objectives for sustainable transport. Significant development should be focused on locations which are or can be made sustainable, through limiting the need to travel and offering a genuine choice of transport modes. This can help to reduce congestion and emissions and improve air quality and public health (para 105). The premature application prevents proper assessment of the optimum options and solutions being analysed and delivered. Cumulative analysis would also be required through the plan making process.
7. This proposed development would generate significant amounts of movement and should be required to provide more information in respect of a travel plan. The application should be supported by a transport statement that enables all the likely impacts of the proposal to be assessed (para 113). For example, there is no assessment of the implications on the A272 through places such as Piltdown and Newick especially in the light of the recent decision of ESCC not to reduce the speed limit in Piltdown to 30 mph and the 60-mph speed limit between Piltdown and Newick.
8. Planning policies and decisions should promote an effective use of land in meeting the need for homes and other uses, while safeguarding and improving the environment and ensuring safe and healthy living conditions. Strategic policies should set out a clear strategy for accommodating objectively assessed needs, in a way that makes as much use as possible of previously developed or 'brownfield' land (para 119). Because the application is premature, the provisions of the NPPF cannot be met. For example, research and analysis are required into potential previously development land (para 120 c), the amount and type of employment floorspace required for the future and the extent to which such requirement is disaggregated and allocated appropriately around the District including Uckfield.
9. Planning policies decisions should recognise that some undeveloped land can perform many functions, such as for wildlife, recreation, flood risk mitigation, cooling/shading, carbon storage or food production (para 120). The proposed development would destroy all the major functions performed by the application site, for example, in terms of food production, strategic gap preventing coalescence, support for biodiversity in and around the application site, flood water storage, contributing to rural landscape character allied to the setting of the hamlet of

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Piltdown, supporting Ancient and Ghyll Woodlands and biodiversity and making a positive contribution to the setting of listed buildings.

10. The creation of high quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve. Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development. So too is effective engagement between applicants, communities, local planning authorities and other interests throughout the process is essential if well designed places are to be achieved (para 126, 132). Applicants should work closely with those affected by their proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community. Applications that can demonstrate early, proactive and effective engagement with the community should be looked on more favourably than those that cannot (132). In this case the applicant has failed, by explicit decision and choice, to engage with local communities in preparing the design.
11. The proposed development would not add to the overall quality of the area nor, given the local environment, be visually attractive as a result of poorly considered architecture, layout and inappropriate and ineffective landscaping (para 130). Due to the lack of binding parameter plans and design codes, the design cannot be judged with any confidence. The proposed development is not sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting (para 130 c).
12. Local planning authorities should seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted scheme (for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used) (para 135). In the absence of binding parameters plans and design codes, no material aspect of quality of the proposal is being secured at the permission stage.
13. The planning system should support the transition to a low carbon future in a changing climate, taking full account of flood risk and coastal change. It should help to: shape places in ways that contribute to radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, minimise vulnerability and improve resilience; encourage the reuse of existing resources, including the conversion of existing buildings; and support renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure (para 152). The proposal in this location cannot be described as supporting a transition to a low carbon future. The application documentation fails to engage in adequate analysis of GHG emissions and flood issues.
14. The proposed development would not contribute to nor enhance the natural and local environment by failing to protect and enhance valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils. The application fails to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services (para 174).
15. Development resulting in the deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland) should be refused unless there are wholly exceptional reasons (para 180). In this case, sensitive ancient woodland adjoins the site, some of which the applicant has failed to identify as such i.e. parts of Park Wood. There are sensitive species in the ancient woodland. It is inevitable that such a scale of development, when combined with existing development, will result in deterioration of the ancient woodland. Ancient woods are irreplaceable.

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APPENDIX 2

FPC Meeting 9 June 2025 – Comments for Planning Application

WD/2025/0922/MEA Land West Of Uckfield - Owlsbury Farm, Horsted Green, Little Horsted TN22 5TJ

Demolition of poultry farm and associated dwelling; erection of up to 1700 new dwellings (including 35% affordable housing and 50 residential care/late living units (C2)); mixed-use centre with retail, commercial and community uses; 2FE primary school including early years provision; multi-purpose sports hub; community allotments; new and enhanced pedestrian/cycle links; open space including new sang; sustainable urban drainage features; children's play areas; landscaping; and creation of two points of access onto A22.

Fletching Parish Council OBJECTS to this application as set out below:

Introduction

- 1) The planning application boundary includes part of the Parish of Fletching. The scale of the development is such that it would have impacts at more than local level. Accordingly, the Parish Council has submitted this objection for the reasons set out. The Parish Council notes the "site" redline area relates to the land ownership boundary of Owlsbury Farm.
- 2) The Parish Council also notes the status of the application as being in outline only save for access. This means that despite the parameter plans fixing a few general principles for decision, the proposal, its argued benefits and the offered mitigation of harm put forward, are only indicative and illustrative and cannot be relied upon. This is a material planning consideration of great weight when a balance is to be struck between benefit and harm of a proposal in such a rural and sensitive location.

Main Issues

- 3) The main issues are: -
 - i) Whether the site is a suitable and sustainable location for a residential development having regard to local and national policies for the provision of housing.
 - ii) The effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the countryside, historic landscape character and the surrounding area, including the Low Weald National Character Area.
 - iii) The effect of the proposal on Ancient Woodland, Priority Habitats and ecology.
 - iv) The loss of agricultural and related multifunctional land.
 - v) Whether the proposals are acceptable in terms of highway safety, drainage and sewerage, and the effect on heritage assets.
 - vi) The planning balance; and
 - vii) Whether the application is premature.

Suitability of Location

- 4) The proposal conflicts with the development plan's spatial strategy because it would involve development within open country outside the settlement boundary of Uckfield, contrary to Policies GD2 and DC17 of the Wealden Local Plan. However, as the Council has less than 5 years of deliverable sites to meet its housing needs, the conflict with these policies is of diminished weight. Yet there is nothing in the Framework to indicate that the definition of settlement boundaries is no longer a suitable policy to direct development towards the most appropriate locations, having regard to other objectives in the development plan.
- 5) A brief review of Owlsbury Farm's location shows that the site is remote and disconnected from the existing Uckfield settlement, being west of the severing A22. The centre of the site is some 2km

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from the Uckfield Railway Station even as the crow flies and yet further from the main town centre facilities and services. The site extends into open countryside and is a randomly large application site area created merely by land ownership as opposed to strategic evidence-based town planning.

- 6) Pedestrians and cyclists seeking to reach the town centre facilities would be presented with unattractive routes. They would be required to navigate the substantial, polluting and noisy barrier of the A22, the Bellbrook Industrial Estate, the proximity of the Uckfield Waste Water Treatment Works and potentially, in due course, the Ridgewood Industrial Estate.
- 7) The proposal would not support a compact 20-minute walkable neighbourhood and as such is in conflict with the strategic aim for Uckfield as set out in emerging Local Plan policy.
- 8) Whilst a bus service would be created, at some point in the future yet to be specified, the service would be limited in its scope and represent modest provision of public transport. It is likely that future occupiers would predominantly use private motor vehicles to access services and facilities. It would be easier, quicker and more convenient to do so by car, notwithstanding the limited bus service. This would be contrary to paragraphs 110, 116 and 118 of the Framework.
- 9) The 2021 Census records Uckfield as having some 6,000 households. The Regulation 18 Draft Local Plan allocates 1,993²⁷ homes to the Parish of Uckfield. The proposal for 1,700 homes would increase the number of additional homes substantially to 3,693 households (by 85%). This figure excludes additional homes allocated in adjoining Parishes such as 235 homes in Maresfield. The total increase represents a fundamental and structural increase in population. Such extensive, rapid and unplanned growth, in the heart of a rural district of a small market town, poses severe challenges to local infrastructure, services, and the rural environment. The facilities to support such an increase in population are not available in terms of schooling, health care and other services. Thus, the proposal would conflict with paras 7,8 and 9 of the Framework.
- 10) There is no strategic or other plan as to how change of such magnitude would be managed and achieved even if the site were suitable which it is not. Thus, the proposal would conflict with paragraphs 15, 16, and 20 of the Framework.
- 11) The proposal would fail to achieve a sustainable pattern of development and conflict with Policies EN1 of Wealden Local Plan 1998 and WCS14 of Wealden Core Strategy 2013.
- 12) The proposal is also contrary to Policies GD2 and DC17 of Wealden Local Plan 1998 and Policies SPO7, SPO13, SPO14 and WCS6 of Wealden Core Strategy 2013.
- 13) Thus, the application site does not represent a suitable and sustainable location for development. The proposal conflicts with paragraph 11 d) ii. of the Framework²⁸.

Character and appearance

- 14) The application site is entirely rural in character. It lies beyond the defined, recognisable, permanent and defensible boundary of the A22. The settlement pattern of Uckfield has evolved east of the A22. The proposal would introduce comprehensive urban form of high density and building height spilling into the landscape west of the A22. This would amount to substantial and incongruous visual intrusion of suburban style development into the open countryside. Any sense of open countryside would be displaced. The proposal would substantially harm, in failing to conserve or enhance, the natural environment of the district. Once the principle of the loss of the long-term defensible A22 boundary is abandoned, it is self-evident that further proposals are likely to come forward exacerbating the urban sprawl into the countryside.
- 15) The proposal would cause substantial harm to local distinctiveness and heritage landscape qualities and characteristics of the district including areas of historic medieval assart field patterns, strong

²⁷ This includes permitted but unbuild homes at Ridgewood Farm – see paragraph 67 below

²⁸ The SHELAA 2024 concluded that Owlsbury Farm (Ref 1061/1410) was not suitable for housing. The site was not considered sufficient, in isolation, or combined with other adjacent land, to deliver genuinely sustainable garden settlement/urban extension.

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network of hedgerows and hedgerow trees, important pockets of Ancient Woodland, watercourses, such as The Uck (a tributary of the River Ouse), and shaws.

- 16) The proposal for large scale urban development in this location would fail to conserve, and substantially harm, the historic landscape of the Low Weald, the characters of the Upper Ouse Valley and Western Low Weald. The characters of the Wooded Clay Vale (Low Weald) and the Uckfield to Hailsham Wooded Clay Vale Landscape Character Areas, (designated areas of high sensitivity to large scale development²⁹) would also be harmed by large scale urban development in this location, given the absence of any relationship with the existing settlement edges.
- 17) The character and function of this part of the Green Infrastructure of the Strategic Uck Valley Green Corridor and the Biodiversity Opportunity Area would be substantially harmed.
- 18) The rural and tranquil setting to Uckfield and Little Horsted and general tranquillity of this rural area would be substantially harmed^{30, 31}.
- 19) Analysis commissioned by Wealden District Council demonstrates that the Parishes of Fletching and Isfield, including the land in which the application site is located, has some of the lowest possible light levels at night and thus the darkest skies. The proposed development would substantially erode and harm dark skies in both Parishes by the introduction of (inter alia) sports ground lighting, street lighting and domestic and commercial lighting. Thus, the strategic objectives to sustain dark skies would be undermined³².
- 20) There is an extensive network of public footpaths linking the Parishes of Isfield and Fletching which lead to Uckfield. The kinetic and static views afforded by this network would be substantially harmed by the proposal³³.
- 21) The application site boundary lies well within the 7km Buffer Zone of the Ashdown Forest being only some 5.5 km away. In the absence of mitigation, there remains the potential for the proposed development to lead to significant adverse effects on the designated sites' conservation objectives and the qualifying species and habitats.
- 22) No Appropriate Assessment containing complete, precise and definitive findings and conclusions in accordance with the relevant Regulations has been required or provided. No scientific evidence demonstrating beyond reasonable doubt has been put forward to show that SANGs and SAMMs are effective in mitigating damage to the SPA produced by this development. The proposal would cause significant harm to the Forest's protected ecosystems and species. The proposal does not constitute an exceptional reason to justify the harm. Thus, the proposal would conflict with Policies EN1 and EN15 of the Wealden Local Plan 1998 and Policy WCS12 of the Core Strategy Local Plan 2013 and the Regulations.
- 23) There is a lack of clarity between the BNG analysis and the SANG analysis. For BNG to be delivered on SANG, the SANG should achieve nature conservation outcomes that demonstrably exceed existing obligations under the SANG guidance, as quantified through the metric³⁴.
- 24) The proposal would conflict with Policies EN1, EN8, EN12, EN27, EN29 and TR1 of Wealden Local Plan 1998; SPO1, SPO13, WSC12, WCS13 and WCS14 of Wealden Core Strategy 2013. The

²⁹ Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Residential and Employment Development Final report Prepared by LUC November 2023, Uckfield to Hailsham Wooded Clay Vale LCA 3A Fig 1.1 and Fig 3.3

³⁰ Wealden Landscape Character Assessment, Prepared by LUC, May 2022, Figure 3.11

³¹ Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Residential and Employment Development Final report Prepared by LUC November 2023 p LUC I B-163

³² Wealden Landscape Character Assessment, Prepared by LUC, May 2022, Figure 3.12

³³ Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Residential and Employment Development Final report Prepared by LUC November 2023 p LUC I B-163

³⁴ Guidelines for Creation of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) – August 2021

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proposal would fail to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside as required by paragraph 187 of the Framework.

- 25) The proposal would conflict with the development plan and with paragraphs 125, 132, 135 and 203 of the Framework.

Ancient Woodland, Priority Habitats and Ecology

- 26) Wealden has the highest concentration of Ancient Woodland in the country. Therefore, there is an exceptional national responsibility to conserve the Ancient Woodlands of Wealden. The proposed scheme fails to demonstrate that the development would not lead to deterioration in the quality of the irreplaceable Ancient Woodland and Priority Habitat deciduous woodland areas including through INNS³⁵. There would also be deterioration in habitat for wildlife as a result of the effects of light (sports ground floodlighting, street lighting and domestic light) and noise pollution and predation as well as recreational disturbance. It is not just the irreplaceable habitat; it is the assemblage of protected, endangered and declining species such as owls, kingfishers, swifts, swallows, woodcock, bats, reptiles, newts, dormice, fireflies, butterflies, moths, slow worms, and adders. These Ancient Woodlands are complex and sensitive ecosystems. This sensitivity is increased by their relationship with watercourses, ghylls, wetlands and the River Uck nearby leading to the River Ouse.
- 27) The proposals would prejudice the ecology of Ancient Woodland and would thus conflict with Policy EN13 and Policy WCS12.
- 28) Paragraph 193 and footnote 70 of the Framework states that such deterioration would require wholly exceptional reasons (such as nationally significant infrastructure projects) to approve the development. The lack of a 5-year land supply does not constitute such an exceptional reason. There is no evidence that such housing cannot be located elsewhere in the District^{36,37}; thus, the need for housing does not constitute such an exceptional reason.
- 29) The proposal fails to have regard to Natural England's Report Geodiversity and Nature Recovery³⁸ in the High Weald. The Report addresses much of the application site, evidencing the wider and essential role of the subject land in supporting the wider High Weald National Landscape and ecosystems. Thus, the proposal is in conflict with paragraph 44 of the Framework.
- 30) The application site contains and abuts sensitive habitats including the River Uck and Ridgewood Stream. The site lies within a Biodiversity Opportunity Area (River Uck and its Headwaters) and the Uck Valley Green Corridor³⁹. The proposal would materially harm a range of ecological networks and habitats.
- 31) The proposal would conflict with Policy EN 15 of the LP and WSC12 of the CS and the Framework insofar as the proposal would harm ecological networks and habitats and would be likely adversely to affect the nature conservation value of protected areas including the Ashdown Forest SPA and SAC.
- 32) The proposal would conflict with paragraphs 125, 187, 188, 192, 193 and 195 of the Framework.

Loss of Agricultural Land

- 33) Much of the application land is classified at Grade 3, Good to Moderate. This is versatile land as opposed to Poor or Very Poor land. The latter is to be preferred where significant development of

³⁵ Invasive Non-Native Species

³⁶ Note Appeal Decision Letter. Land at Downlands Farm, Uckfield, TN22 3PU APP/C1435/W/23/3321978, dated 13th November 2023

³⁷ Defra Magic Maps demonstrate a sharp reduction in the distribution of Ancient Woodland in the south of the District, i.e. further from the High Weald

³⁸ June 2024

³⁹ Wealden Green Infrastructure Study 2017 Figure 5.1, Box 5.3, Figure 5.3

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land is demonstrated to be necessary as stated in the Framework at paragraphs 125 b), 187 and 188.

- 34) The application site as a whole contains a wide range of interconnected functions. Some of these functions such as landscape character, nature and ecology extend beyond the application site boundary. It is necessary to recognise that such undeveloped land can perform many functions, such as for wildlife, recreation, flood risk mitigation, cooling/shading, carbon storage or food production. The proposal would fail to sustain carbon storage and would be lost to food production and harm to biodiversity including protected and other fauna given the Biodiversity Opportunity Area (River Uck and its Headwaters) running north to south through the centre of the site. The result is that there would be irreversible harm to and a substantial loss of multifunctional land as whole.
- 35) Thus, the proposal would conflict with paragraphs 125 and 181 of the Framework.

Other Matters

- 36) *Highways* – The assessment of Transport and Movement refers to the limited data available and the assumptions that have been made which cast doubt on the validity the conclusions of the analysis. The traffic impacts and highway implications have not been adequately assessed with up-to-date survey information.
- 37) There is clear evidence that there has been a substantial increase in traffic flows on the A272 particularly since a new Marks and Spencer food store opened in November 2023 at Maresfield some 5 km to the north of the application site. This combined with a cumulative increase in traffic post the pandemic has resulted in the A272 being congested especially at peak times. Thus, the analysis of traffic impacts in the application is unreliable. It does not assess junctions in the Parish of Fletching at Piltdown which are becoming noticeably problematic.
- 38) The A22 is congested and increasingly so. The cumulative impacts of recent new development combined with increased traffic flows are substantial. Committed planning permissions have yet to be implemented which would exacerbate the impacts. The local network including Uckfield High Street is often highly congested during the day.
- 39) In respect of the rail network, stations are illustrated which are only short local heritage lines (at Isfield and Sheffield Park). Incorrect references are made to Uckfield Railway Station providing regular services to Haywards Heath and Eastbourne. Such services are only available through long journey times and indirect routes via East Croydon in London.
- 40) The analysis concludes that there would be no construction traffic on the A272 which seems improbable. For example, there are frequent HGV vehicles to be seen moving spoil along the A272.
- 41) The assessment of walking times from the proposal is measured from the centre of the proposal. This means that 50% of walkers' time would exceed the estimates. These estimates in themselves substantially exceed the recommended 20-minute neighbourhood walk time.
- 42) The assessment relies on a "vision-led" approach. The vision is illustrative and indicative only. There is a lack of clarity on how the vision would be delivered in practice (having regard to the applicant being a land trader and not a developer and the application being wholly in outline save access), in terms of timing of delivery of each element, definitive phasing, secure bonded funding at the application stage to secure delivery revenue and capital funding, operational management, commitment from transport partners and proven examples of such delivery.
- 43) The Framework requires the achievement of well-designed, sustainable and popular places, and provision of the transport solutions to deliver those outcomes. The emphasis of the Framework is on "achievement", "provision" and "delivery" as opposed to aspiration and illustrative indicative material as shown in the application.
- 44) Thus, the proposal is contrary to paragraphs 109, 110, 111, 115, 116, 117, 118, 187, 192 and Annex 2 of the Framework.

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- 45) *Drainage and sewerage* – These have two aspects, the first being protection of the watercourses including their ecology on, and near, the application site. SuDS are proposed in close proximity to Ancient Woodlands and watercourses leading to the River Ouse. Surface water run off containing oils, tyre rubber particles and other pollutants would harm these sensitive and irreplaceable ecosystems. The proposal would exacerbate flood risk from runoff and loss of ground water storage. The application lacks clarity on the impacts of the proposal on the River Uck and Ridgewood Stream and wider habitats and ecosystems. ESCC Flood Risk have stated that the applicant has failed to meet the requirements to assess the proposal's acceptability in terms of flood risk.
- 46) Furthermore, the site constitutes the majority of the area of the designated Nitrate Vulnerable Zone situated to the west of the A22 demonstrating the particular vulnerability of local watercourses. The application does not appear to seek to achieve nutrient neutrality.
- 47) The second is the evidence that statutory undertakers are failing to provide adequate capacity, either in time or at all, for new development. Recent data for 2024 demonstrates substantial sewage dumping including in the Uckfield area.
- 48) The closest Wastewater treatment works (Wwtw) is the Uckfield Wwtw. This is on the A22, opposite the application site. It is recorded as having spilled 71 times (672.2 hours) between 2021 and 2024 and 19 times for a total of 178 hours in 2024 (permit number A00534), discharging into the Ridgewood Stream, which is a tributary to the Uck. The Uck joins the Ouse nearby just north of Isfield. The permitted spills are generally accepted to be an underestimate of the actual spills, as there is no independent monitoring. There is also a cumulative impact on rivers as there are a number of spilling Wwtws up stream of the site and elsewhere in the River Ouse catchment (e.g. Newick).
- 49) The cumulative impact of total discharge into the River Ouse has created substantial harm. In February 2025, the Lewes District Council (LDC) made a decision to support the principles of a "Rights of River Charter" for the River Ouse. This was a groundbreaking decision, as LDC became the first council in England to recognize a river's legal rights.
- 50) Whilst Grampian conditions have been imposed⁴⁰ requiring an acceptable foul drainage scheme to be in place before any ground works take place on a site (and the scheme implemented prior to first occupation of any dwelling and requiring trapped gullies and silt traps for all surface water), nonetheless this matter should be resolved in assessing the first principles of development. To grant permission subject to such a fundamental condition (which may never be discharged) is to distort effective town planning, especially in respect of housing land supply analysis.
- 51) Thus, the proposal is contrary to paragraphs 161, 162, 181, 182 and 187 of the Framework.
- 52) *Designated Heritage Assets* – Owlsbury Farmhouse is listed as being of special architectural or historic interest (Grade II). The exclusion of the farmstead from the application at this stage does not negate the need to apply the statutory test. It is clear that the proposal would cause harm to the wider rural setting of the Farmhouse. The open fields of the site are an important element of the rural hinterland of the farmstead. They illustrate the historic relationship between the house and the agricultural activities of the surrounding open fields. The area remains open farmland. There are demonstrable functional and visual links between the farmhouse and the site.
- 53) To insert the proposal into the rural landscape would harm the setting of the farmhouse. Given the functional and visual connections between the site and the listed building, the proposal would fail the statutory duty to preserve the rural setting of the listed buildings. The harm would be substantial in terms of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework).

Planning Balance

⁴⁰ And upheld on appeal – Appeal Ref: APP/C1435/W/24/3343709, Land at Old Orchard House, Horebeech Lane, Horam TN21 9DZ, 7th March 2025

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- 54) Paragraph 11 states that, where a Council cannot demonstrate a five-year supply of housing and policies are out of date then permission should be granted unless any adverse effects of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits when assessed against the policies of the Framework as a whole.
- 55) The proposal might deliver 1,700 dwellings including affordable housing (albeit that there is lack of clarity on tenure such as the quantum of social rent, discounted market rent and other tenures) and boost the supply of housing and contribute to meeting the housing needs of the District. This is a matter of substantial importance carrying significant weight in the planning balance.
- 56) Whilst the proposal would provide some other benefits, such as employment during the construction phase and during the lifetime of the development, residents bringing social and economic benefits including using existing local facilities and contributing to Uckfield life and provision of open space, these attract moderate weight. There is a lack of evidence to demonstrate when onsite services and facilities would be provided and, if provided, that their delivery and long-term financial and managed resilience is viable. The indicative phasing states that these benefits are unlikely to be provided until the end of the development period. The scope and topics of the proposed planning obligations are inadequate to secure the benefits put forward. This is a matter of substantial weight given the manner in which the proposal is put forward to justify development on this site. For example, the Ridgewood Farm development nearby failed to include effective triggers and obligations for timely and necessary delivery of the employment land use and other benefits. Thus, the proposal would conflict with paragraph 35 of the Framework.
- 57) Set against these social and economic benefits is the substantial harm that would arise in respect the lack of suitability and sustainability of the location. The proposal would conflict with the development plan policies relating to the location of development. Paragraph 49 of the Framework makes it clear that due weight should be given to existing policies according to their degree of consistency with the Framework. The Framework expects particular regard be had to key policies for directing development to sustainable locations. There are no policies which positively favour residential development in this location. In accordance with the provisions of the Framework, including paragraph 11 d) ii., great weight should be given to such harm.
- 58) The proposal's siting, design and layout in open countryside would harm the rural character and function of the landscape. It would cause significant harm to the character and appearance this part of the Low Weald. The failure adequately to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside would cause substantial harm and should be afforded great weight.
- 59) The proposal would cause harm to, and deterioration of, Ancient Woodland and Priority Habitats. The Framework directs that this is a matter which constitutes a clear reason for refusal.
- 60) The proposal would also cause harm to ecology and habitats.
- 61) The application anticipates that, at best, 14 years would be required for construction. Critical mitigation of adverse social, economic and environmental impacts is not provided, due to the indicative phasing, until the later phases of the development period resulting in unmitigated adverse impacts for at least a decade and, more likely, a longer period not least due to market failure in delivery. Ecological impacts, prior to delivery and maturity of mitigation, would be substantial and no analysis of impact pathways and potential impacts on recovery has been undertaken. Once harmed, ecosystems and species may have great difficulty in recovery, if recovery is achieved at all.
- 62) The Government has given a cast iron commitment to maintain long term food production⁴¹ and to protect highest quality agricultural land. Much of the application site is of good quality. The loss of the land, together with other functions such as its capacity for existing and future carbon storage, wildlife, ecology and recreation, represents significant harm. These are matters which weigh heavily against the proposal.

⁴¹ 31st January 2025

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- 63) The proposal would create significant impacts on water courses at local and regional levels.
- 64) The adverse impacts of transport and movement from the development both in isolation and cumulatively would be severe.
- 65) The harm to designated heritage assets has been considered. The failure to preserve the setting of the listed building is a matter of considerable weight and importance and counts against the scheme.
- 66) Whilst high quality design and a commitment to climate resilient development may be potential benefits of the scheme, the Framework identifies these as being key components of sustainable development. The factors are neutral and do not weigh in favour of the proposal. Indeed, there is a lack of binding commitment through planning obligations to suitably detailed Design Codes that reflect the High Weald Housing Design Guide and associated Colour Guide. The Wealden Design Guide 2008 has failed to deliver housing of sufficiently high-quality contextual design hence the High Weald Guide is more up-to-date and appropriate to the Weald landscape.
- 67) Collectively the adverse impacts would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits when assessed against the policies in the Framework as a whole.
- 68) The weight attributable to the housing benefit is diminished when assessed against the structural market failure for housing provision in Wealden. As of October 2024, there is an unbuilt permitted supply of 8,400 homes equivalent to 5.82 years supply against the housing target provision. In the Uckfield market, only some 25% of the 1,000 home Ridgewood Farm development immediately east of the application site, closer to the town centre, has been completed notwithstanding that outline planning permission was granted over 9 years ago⁴². The failure of Ridgewood to come forward in full has also resulted in land use and other benefits failing to be delivered such as the 12,500 sq m of employment floorspace. Other substantial proposals, further increasing potential supply in competition to the subject proposal, have been permitted nearby such as at Horstedpond Farm⁴³. The rate of release of housing supply by developers into the Wealden market, including Uckfield, is consistently and demonstrably slow.
- 69) Demand is constrained by the long-term unaffordability created by price:earnings ratios. These in turn are not the result of a lack of housing supply as commonly believed but are the result of the long-term trend of stimulus of house prices caused by highly expanded lending by financial institutions, secured against housing, following deregulation of financial markets in the 1980s. This major step change in the availability of finance combined with historically low interest rates between 2008 and 2022 have exacerbated house price inflation. The stimulus is further sustained by fiscal and taxation policies.
- 70) In striking the balance between the harm that would be caused by the proposal to this particular site and beyond, and the benefit of potential housing provision, the adverse impact of market failure to implement planning permissions is a material planning consideration of substantial weight.

Prematurity

- 71) The 2021 Census records Uckfield as having some 6,000 households. The Regulation 18 Draft Local Plan allocates 1,993 homes. The proposal would increase this substantially to a total 3,693 households. This represents a fundamental and structural increase in population.
- 72) The proposal would represent a near doubling of allocation. It would be sited to the west of the long-term A22 bypass boundary.
- 73) The Framework states that prematurity is unlikely to justify refusal in the circumstances of this application. Thus, the Framework does not preclude the possibility in all circumstances. In considering the future of the rural market town of Uckfield, the development proposed would be so substantial, and its cumulative effect would be so significant, that to grant permission would indeed

⁴² 24th March 2016

⁴³ 340 dwellings

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undermine the plan-making process by predetermining decisions about the scale, location or phasing of new development that are central to the emerging plan for the town and the District as a whole.

- 74) The acute sensitivity of the location, the character and the ecological value of the application site and the scale of the proposal are such that the prematurity reason for refusal is engaged in the specific circumstances of this case notwithstanding the early stage of the Local Plan.

Overall Conclusions

- 75) The proposal would be contrary to the development plan. There are no other considerations, including the provisions of the Framework, which would justify the grant of planning permission.
- 76) Fletching Parish Council considers that there are sound and clearcut reasons for planning permission to be refused.