

LAND AT SOUTHDOWNS ROAD, LEWES, EAST SUSSEX

Appeal against the refusal of the SDNPA to grant planning permission for this site.
Inspectorate Appeal reference – A/13/2204084

Statement by the Friends of Lewes Society and the South Downs Society in support of the refusal.

1. The Friends of Lewes Society is the civic society for the town of Lewes and has about 500 members. It has been in existence since 1952 and, among other things, monitors and comments as necessary on all planning issues, including planning applications affecting the town. The South Downs Society is the accredited National Park Society for the South Downs National Park and regards itself as the National Park Authority's critical friend. It was first formed in 1923 and has taken a consistent line in opposing developments that would adversely affect the landscape. It has, however, only been concerned with developments in Lewes since the National Park was created in 2010. I, Robert Cheesman, have lived in Lewes for over 60 years and am the Chairman of both Societies. This statement represents the approved collective views of both bodies.
2. Both Societies were members of the South Downs Campaign which fought not just for a National Park for the South Downs but for the inclusion of Lewes within it. This was achieved as both the Inspector and Secretary of State accepted the argument that the requirements for designation as a National Park were met as the town is surrounded by downland and itself possesses much cultural heritage. Both the Town and District Councils supported inclusion of Lewes within the National Park as they believed that such a body would have higher design standards when considering planning applications.
3. Although the town is within the National Park both Societies accept that it should not become a museum and that it should retain economic viability with the provision of housing on acceptable sites. In this connection development of brown field sites, such as that in South Downs Road, is far more acceptable than development of greenfield sites. The Societies therefore raise no objection to the concept that this site should be developed for housing.
4. It is recognised that the 2003 District Local Plan envisaged the site being used for economic activity. Whilst this may have been appropriate at that time it is no longer the greatest need for available development land in Lewes. Priorities have changed and it is believed there is now sufficient office accommodation in the town to meet current demand whilst a survey undertaken for the developer of the much larger North Street Quarter or Phoenix Estate in the town showed that there was a need for affordable houses principally of either 1 or 2 bedrooms. The Societies consider that in the spirit of localism this need should both be recognised and met on this site despite the provisions in the extant District Local Plan. Whilst initial discussions have commenced on a Neighbourhood Plan for the town these have not yet reached the stage of identifying specific requirements or particular areas where they could be met. The same is true of the Joint Core Strategy being prepared by Lewes District Council in conjunction with the National Park Authority, whilst the Options Consultation document for the National Park Authority's own Local Plan is not specific on these issues.

Affordable housing

5. As mentioned in para 4 above there is a need for more affordable housing in the town. This

is confirmed by recent information provided by Lewes District Council which says there is an immediate need for rented accommodation for 497 households in the town and some additional demand for shared ownership or equity housing. The Council's Housing Needs and Strategy recommends that in providing affordable housing 30% should be 1 bedroom, 50% 2 bedroom and the remainder of 3 bedrooms. Whilst it is recognised that the costs of developing this site may be higher than elsewhere in view of its location on the flood plain, and because it was previously used to deposit household rubbish, this should not be used as a reason for not including affordable housing in any proposal. The additional costs of doing so could be recouped by eliminating commercial units and having a greater number of smaller housing units so that the site made a greater contribution to meeting the overall housing targets for the town. The provision of affordable housing in new developments was a feature of the District Local Plan and this site is an ideal place for it.

Design

6. The fact that the site has some warehouse type buildings to the east and an out of character office building to the south should not be allowed to influence the argument for better design on this site. These buildings were given permission before the National Park Authority came into existence and it is questionable if they would have given approval given their purpose and the design standards they are now applying. The outcome of this appeal will serve as a precedent for the design standards to be applied at other developments in the town as well as across the National Park.
7. The specific criticisms of the current design are that it lacks any Lewes character, fails to integrate or have connectivity with the area around the site, and is very repetitive in nature in both mass, height and materials. It would essentially be an isolated uninviting almost impermeable enclave both physically and visually with only very narrow twittens out of it to Blake's Walk. It has no relationship with, but nevertheless would dominate, the existing housing to the north and is largely of an inner urban nature for a site that is outside the central part of the town but nevertheless close to the Malling Deanery Conservation Area. Its design is not typical of the area which has a mix of tiles, flint, stone, bricks and hipped roofs. The proposed grey tiles are certainly not typical of the area. When viewed from Malling Hill its roofscape would have no features to mark it out as a worthy addition to the town. In that connection some variety in the height of buildings and their massing and an increase in tree cover would make it more acceptable.
8. The Societies therefore support the detailed arguments being made by the National Park Authority's Design Officer to support their refusal of the planning application. In essence the proposal is not one that fits into the character of the town or integrates with the housing to the north of the site. It is not one that local people support.

Conclusion

9. As mentioned previously the Societies have no objection to the site being used for housing. If the appeal is dismissed, they would be happy to work with the developer, as they are doing with other developers in the town, on what would be acceptable on this site so that a further planning application could be made.