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High Weald AONB Unit

Report on amended plans, uploaded 30th March 2012 to SDC portal.

FAO:

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Planning consultation (electronic)

Land adjacent to Forge Garage, High Street, Penshurst. SE/11/02258

Thank you for the additional information and Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment regarding application SE/11/02258, land adjacent to Forge Garage, Penshurst.

The development may affect the components of natural beauty identified by the High Weald AONB Management Plan 2004, specifically historic field boundaries (objective FH2). Historic maps clearly show the boundaries and pattern of the development site, and the site is a surviving example of the historic pattern of small irregular fields that characterise the High Weald. The development will change the character of this field from undeveloped open countryside to a partially developed site, clearly impacting on the natural beauty of the landscape.

In regard to the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, the Unit is disappointed that the study appears not to follow the Landscape Institute's standard methodology set out in GLVIA and it is therefore, in our opinion, incomplete.

Under the Landscape Institute guidelines it is clear that Landscape and Visual issues are separate but linked effects. Landscape impacts are effects on the physical environmental resource. Visual effects are interrelated effects on population, but significantly as stated by the guidance; "2.14. Landscape effects derive from changes in the physical landscape, which may give rise to changes in its character and how this is experienced. This may in turn affect the perceived value ascribed to the landscape." para 2.14, p12 Guidelines for landscape and visual impact assessment, 2nd Edition 2002

This study does not make any assessment of the impacts on the physical landscape resource, the perceived value of the site or how the character of the site will be changed by the proposed development. In our view it is therefore, incomplete.

The visual assessment also appears to be superficial relying on a few photos of views, some from slightly impossible situations to conclude that as the site is not (apparently) visible, there is no impact. The cover picture of the assessment clearly shows that the site will obscure and be visible from the surrounding area. The assessment does not appear to account for the scale and mass of the buildings when situated within the landscape. Without a full landscape assessment such a conclusion can not be substantiated. The visual assessment alone is inadequate to understand the impacts and change.

The visual assessment appears to be little more than a series of photos taken from selected viewpoints. It is accepted that the site is not particularly visible from long distance views,

although it may have helped if for instance photo 3 was not from behind a fence and black plastic, or if photo 5 didn't have a huge tree dead centre. Similarly photo 7 is obscured by a large tree stump, which happens to intersect the site location. It would also be of assistance if the photomontages had indicated the site location and angle more clearly. For instance photo 6 – a critical view - appears to have the site on the far left, almost out of shot. It is hard to identify the site location in these views.

The conclusion in 6.1 is also flawed. It refers to the complex topography and ground, suggesting that this hides or obscures the views. In fact this location is a broad river valley with relatively open field systems, rising on gradually sloping ground. The site itself is located on one of these slopes and is very exposed to the river valley and higher ground. The location is neither complex nor obscured, and the higher ground open to the site increases the exposure of the site to the wider landscape. The conclusion does not include any scoring matrices of value or quality (that would be normally expected in such a study) or other indicators to support the process and overall assessment made.

In respect of the amended plans and site layout, the revised layout is supported as presenting a more traditional and softer facing to the wider landscape. However, the indicative hedgerow and landscaping planting is not appropriate, in that it presents a very formal, linear and artificial edge to the development. The character of the site as an open field could be better respected by accepting the intrusion and allowing the gardens and built form to merge into the field with a mixture of traditional fencing and irregular shaped tree and shrub planting. The planting alongside the Forge Garage will similarly obscure and box in the built form and create an artificial and suburbanised feel. A simpler small fencing scheme may be more appropriate.

The proposal still includes an extensive area of hard standing and surfacing, now to the front elevation, which is out of character with the rural location and with the village itself. Greater thought to the design and layout of the parking, and the surfacing treatment may help to reduce the impact. I am assuming that parking standards have been applied, but 14 parking spaces for 6 houses seems excessive, and does not promote sustainable approaches to transport. The scale of the buildings is a concern, with the very large roofs forming a significant mass against the landscape and village-scape behind. The design idea to reflect the village vernacular is excellent but does itself generate a major impact.

Overall the design is still too complicated and 'fussy'. In our view any impact or effects that the development may have on the wider landscape will not necessarily be solved by some local planting. Hiding a development is not a responsible approach to mitigating harm that arises as a result of the development. A more honest approach might seek to celebrate the sites prominent position at the entrance to the village by promoting excellent design, clearly marking the transition from open rural agricultural character, rather than trying to disguise the development with planting.

We would also like to draw your attention to the missed opportunities for this development to support the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty by, for instance, supporting land management through the use of local materials in construction, use of renewable energy sources such as wood fuel or support for the wider objectives for AONB management.

Andrew Shaw
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