South Northamptonshire Local Plan (Part 2a) Consultation – Representations

South Northants Council (SNC) is undertaking consultation on the Local Plan Part 2a document from 4 April until 10 June 2016. These representations are prepared in response to the current consultation exercise and relate to land in our clients ownership (The Trustees of Towcester Racecourse) at Towcester Racecourse, London Road, Towcester.

Background

The West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy (WNJCS) was adopted in December 2014 and sets out the vision, objectives and strategic policies for delivering growth to the District, including setting overall requirements for new development and identifying locations for larger scale (strategic) growth.

The emerging Local Plan Part 2a document will build on the strategic policies and guidance contained in the WNJCS, including determining appropriate levels of growth at the local level, allocating land for specific uses including housing, employment, retail, recreation and leisure uses and setting out detailed planning policies that will be used to guide new development over the plan period.

The Local Plan Part 2a consultation documents (Options Consultation Document and Questions, paragraph 2.9) indicates that the WNJCS includes a number of strategic allocations for housing, leisure and employment development within South Northamptonshire, including at Towcester Racecourse. In this case, Towcester Racecourse is identified through Policy T1 of the WNJCS as a strategic location for the ‘protection and improvement of facilities at the Racecourse’. WNJCS Policy T5 builds on the aspirations laid out in Policy T1 by further supporting the intensification of uses at Towcester Racecourse, including the development of additional leisure, recreational, tourism and exhibition facilities.

While the purpose of the emerging Local Plan Part 2a document is to build on, and provide detail to, the framework for growth provided by the WNJCS, the emerging consultation documents exclude further detailed policies and guidance relating to those strategic allocations identified through the WNJCS (including Towcester Racecourse), on the basis that site masterplans will be prepared.

In line with the WNJCS aspirations for Towcester Racecourse, an indicative masterplan has been prepared providing an overarching framework to deliver future development at the site, including an established development boundary, defined development parcels alongside likely land uses
envisaged to come forward over coming years. Two key elements of the indicative masterplan include the continued use and expansion of existing operations (such as the racing facilities), and the wider leisure opportunities presented within the wider site.

The indicative masterplan has evolved over an 18 month period and was presented to senior officers of South Northants Council in September 2015 and March 2016, in order to obtain their views on the scale and scope of new leisure-based activities at the Racecourse.

Discussions confirmed that within the context of adopted planning policy (Joint Core Strategy draft Policies T1 and T5) there is significant scope to diversify uses on site for leisure and tourism related development, with a view to creating a visitor ‘destination’, subject to a satisfactory impact on the high quality setting of the historic Parks and Gardens (of the Easton Neston Estate) and wider Open Countryside views.

In terms of potential uses, hotel, restaurant, conference facility and gymnasium type uses were all considered suitable leisure based activities that could be supported at the site. Within this context, officers also acknowledged that there is scope to deliver complementary uses including high end eateries and a retail dimension comprising high-end boutique shops for example. It was noted that any such proposals must be fully considered / assessed through the masterplanning process, in order to ensure all facets of South Northants Council, ranging from its policy officers through to members, are fully aware of the proposals and thus supportive of future developments, in advance of any planning application coming forward at the site.

In view of the above, officers agreed that the emerging Local Plan Part Two process provides an opportunity to highlight and clarify the wider intentions for the site, by including a site specific policy supported by the indicative masterplan, that would confirm the full extent of the site (in terms of its development boundaries) and include a clear range of policy-compliant land uses, to add further weight to the aspirations laid out in Joint Core Strategy T5. Such an approach will ensure that the future intentions of the Racecourse are more widely known, ultimately smoothing the path for future development at the site.

Representations

Notwithstanding the above, the Local Plan Part 2a consultation documents currently excludes a site specific policy relating to Towcester Racecourse, which builds on and supports those WNJCS policies (T1 and T5) and which clarifies support for the range of land uses discussed with senior officers over the past 18 month period.

Following those positive discussions with senior officers at SNC, the landowners now seek to deliver a new sports and leisure village concept to Towcester Racecourse, with a view to making an outline planning application during Spring 2017. However, in doing so, the supporting policy framework (Policy T5) contained in the WNJCS does not encompass the full range of uses discussed and envisaged at the site. In this case, Policy T5 only includes reference to additional leisure, recreational, tourism and exhibition facilities. In line with our discussions with senior officers and if the potential of the Racecourse is to be fully maximised, a sufficiently flexible policy should be included within the Local Plan Part 2a document which further clarifies the range of sport and leisure uses envisaged at the site.

Furthermore, the Racecourse boundary defined by WNJCS Policy T5 is tightly drawn around the existing facilities including wider land to the west, which lies within the boundaries of the historic parks and gardens of the Easton Neston Estate. Given this designation, any new development on land to the west of existing Racecourse infrastructure is likely to result in an adverse impact on the historic parks and gardens while adversely affecting wider views of the Racecourse from the Empress and Grace Stands. On this basis, the indicative masterplan prepared to inform new development at the site seeks to concentrate new sports and leisure-based activities on land to
the east of the existing Racecourse infrastructure, sited primarily beyond the boundaries of the historic park and gardens designation.

While senior officers have indicated their support for new sports and leisure-based development at this location, the wider land to the east of existing Racecourse infrastructure currently falls outside the Racecourse boundaries defined through WNJCS Policy T5. In order to ensure that any new sports and leisure uses to the east of the existing Racecourse infrastructure is supported both in policy terms and at planning application stage, a site specific policy should be included in the Local Plan Part 2a document, which clarifies the full extent of the Racecourse site including the entire area of developable land, as defined on the indicative masterplan.

The inclusion of a site specific policy within the Local Plan Part 2a document will provide sufficient clarity and comfort for officers and members when seeking to deliver the sports and leisure village concept to the Racecourse. This approach will also add further weight and support for the expansion of existing operational developments at the site, including provision of essential infrastructure (parking areas / lighting), to support those operations. This approach will ensure the principle of additional operational development is established in advance of any future planning applications coming forward, ultimately avoiding a piecemeal / ad-hoc approach to future developments at the site.

In view of the comments above, the Local Plan Part 2a document indicates at Chapter 11 (community and leisure provision) that sites for new community and leisure facilities are scarce due primarily to land values and the fact suitable development sites are much more likely to be sold for residential or commercial development. Question 40 contained within the consultation documents therefore asks whether there are other community and leisure options that need to be included. In response and in line with the comments above, a site specific policy relating to Racecourse’s future development, which adds further weight to Policy T5 and which clarifies a flexible range of sports and leisure uses that could come forward at the site over forthcoming years, should be included within the Local Plan Part 2a document. Such an approach will provide clarity on land uses at the site and provide sufficient comfort to SNC and the local community, that the full sports and leisure needs of Towcester and the surrounding District could be accommodated and delivered at the Racecourse.

Summary

The indicative masterplan enclosed for information alongside this representation, sets out a vision and framework of how the Racecourse site could be delivered. While the indicative masterplan identifies some of the key opportunities this is not exhaustive and is not fixed in any way. It is merely an indication of the aspirations of the landowner and the opportunities that exist.

In order to ensure there is sufficient policy support for the range of sport and leisure based activities discussed and presented to senior SNC officers to date, a sufficiently flexible policy should be included in the Local Plan Part 2a document. In this case a flexible policy will enable new development at the Site to respond to market conditions and commercial reality as well as provide the relevant Development Management tool to assist with future planning applications and delivery of development.

In addition, the emerging Local Plan Part 2a should include a revised Racecourse boundary, incorporating the land to the east of existing Racecourse infrastructure, which currently falls outside the Racecourse boundaries, defined under WNJCS Policy T5. This approach will ensure that new sports and leisure based development can come forward within a less prominent area of the Racecourse site, enclosed by built development to the east, south and west. New development at this location will also ensure the long term protection of the wider historic park and gardens designation to the west of existing Racecourse infrastructure.
We trust the above is useful and we look forward to discussing further with senior officers in due course.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Associate
For and on behalf of GVA Grimley Limited