

LINTON PARISH COUNCIL

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Fao Ashley Wynn, Case Officer

16/508659FULL – Land South of Redwall Lane, Linton

Thank you for allowing us an extension to the timetable for submitting comments in respect of this planning application. Linton Parish Council has considered it in detail and has conducted a site visit. It has voted to STRONGLY OBJECT to this application, on a number of grounds as set out below.

1. Inappropriate Industrial Development

Linton PC has no objection to Berry Gardens Ltd as a business and wishes to encourage and support rural businesses generally. We have not objected to previous planning applications for the Wares Farm site such as 08/0694. Important factors then included undertakings that the perimeter of the site would not be extended, and that specific efforts would be made to reduce both the transport impact and the environmental impact of the business and site.

This application however overturns both those previous undertakings and it is clear from the supporting documentation that Berry Gardens Ltd is no longer a local rural business, but a global industrial concern with turnover now in excess of £300m pa. The vast majority of their business is import based, with very little local or even UK content in percentage terms. They say that they expect to double the business in size every five years, and have allocated further land for future expansion even beyond the massive structure now proposed. Although that may be very creditable in pure business terms, it clearly cannot be sustained in their current location. They cannot claim to be a "local rural business" in any reasonable way.

Linton is a rural parish. We have only 500 or so residents and the primary businesses in Linton (Wares Farm site apart) are farming and tourism. It is a very scenic place, being situated along and around the Greensand Ridge National Character Area and is within a designated site of Special Landscape Interest. It performs a valuable role as a rural lung and a buffer to the urban spread of Maidstone, and it must be protected. The Greensand Way long distance footpath runs East-West across the parish and the views from there and elsewhere across Linton are some of the best in Kent and the South East. An industrial development of this massive size cannot be hidden and will cause material damage to both residents and visitors to Linton. If this industrial expansion goes ahead, this single site will have twice the population, and more traffic movements and other adverse impacts, than the entirety of the rest of the surrounding area put together.

2. Environmental Impact – Visual and Ecological

This application runs flatly counter to a number of established and emerging MBC policies:

Saved Policy ENV 28 specifically states that "planning permission will not be given for development which harms the character and appearance of the area or the amenities of surrounding occupiers," and "development will be confined to that which is reasonably necessary for the purposes of agriculture .."

Saved Policy ENV34 gives particular attention to the 'protection and conservation of the scenic quality and distinctive character of the area` and gives priority to the landscape over other planning considerations.

Emerging Policy SP5 reinforces the protection to be given to Special Landscape Areas. The development would also contravene SP17 and DM41 in the draft Local Plan.

Para 17 NPPF sets out 12 Core Planning Principles, one of which states that planning should 'take account of the differing roles and character of different areas... recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside...;

Para 109 NPPF states that 'The Planning System should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing the valued landscapes...'

The application site is located in a Landscape of Local Value (Greensand Ridge) which washes over the area. This planning application is for an area not deemed suitable by the above criteria as an employment site. Therefore it qualifies as an automatic refusal and if it does not one could conclude that a huge waste of time, effort and expense has been invested in creating that part of the Local Plan. Similarly, the Policies and guidelines that map out what is and is not appropriate should not be manipulated beyond recognition to make the application fit.

The Maidstone Landscape Character Assessment (July 2013) classes the Linton Greensand Ridge area as being of strong character and high sensitivity. It makes frequent mention of the attraction of the "panoramic and extensive views to the South" and specifically states that MBC should:

- Conserve orchards and the traditional small scale field pattern
- Conserve and, where opportunities arise, extend relict areas of lowland acid grassland and wood pasture
- Conserve the rural setting of traditional buildings
- Conserve distinctive ragstone walling
- Conserve the undeveloped character of the landscape
- Avoid linear infill development along roads
- Soften the impact of agricultural buildings and fruit equipment storage areas

The generic guidelines for dealing with the Greensand Ridge say inter alia:

- Conserve the rural setting of traditional buildings and small settlements
- Conserve the narrow, enclosed lanes and avoid highway improvements which may weaken this characteristic
- Conserve and strongly promote the use of ragstone as a key material
- Consider the views towards any proposals across this exposed and elevated landform from the Low Weald to the south

At present the proposed site comprises good quality agricultural land in the open countryside, which would be irretrievably lost if used for industrial buildings. The passage of the River Beult from Headcorn through to Hunton and Yalding is a particularly rural and scenic one, some of it quite remote, which would be adversely impacted by this development and its associated groundworks.

If all of the MBC Local Plans and related policies are to be ignored to this extent, it makes a nonsense of the entire Local Planning framework. And if the application were approved, it would not only undermine the Local Plan but also set a disastrous precedent for future industrial development in the Kent countryside.

3. Environmental Impact – Transport considerations

The roads and lanes in the vicinity of Wares Farm are narrow, and in no way suitable for the volume of traffic this development will generate, from car movements or from HGV and lorry movements. These lanes are already under pressure from the existing business, from the increasing population of surrounding areas such as Coxheath, Staplehurst and Marden, and from traffic attempting to bypass the holdups at the A229/B2163 junction, Linton crossroads. The application documentation concedes that this traffic cannot all be channelled along Redwall Lane and we do not believe that would even be possible, since it has clearly not been achieved with the existing business - as you will be aware from some of the photographic and other evidence submitted by other objectors. The site is surrounded by very narrow and difficult single track lanes such as Lacey's lane, Bonfleur Lane, Westerhill and Vanity Lane, all of which nevertheless regularly suffer from the passage of HGV lorries.

Wares Farm was previously used as a transport depot by Messrs Alan Firmin Ltd. This operation was moved around the year 2000 to a site near the M20. This was done at least in part because it was felt that the Wares Farm site was inconvenient for the operation of HGVs in view of its rural location at the foot of Linton Hill, and its remoteness from the motorway network. It is quite illogical to encourage large scale HGV movements once again now, when the road network is so much more crowded than it was then.

We consider that the local road infrastructure is completely inadequate to support even the number of car and HGV movements proposed, which we feel are in any event understated. There will be damage to the local lanes, further pressure on Linton Crossroads and a loss of amenity to local residents. There is no evidence that improvements to Linton Crossroads will be made in any reasonable timeframe.

4. Economic Impact

We concede that some economic benefit is likely to accrue to the region, as with any growing business. However we consider that it is unlikely that any benefits will accrue to Linton itself. All the impacts on Linton would be negative ones. Relocating the business to a more suitable industrial site in an area with a more supportive infrastructure would retain the benefits to the region whilst removing the downsides for Linton and for the countryside.

5. Other Impacts and Concerns

Within living memory, the Beult has flooded more than once to an extent that includes much of the proposed site. Given recent climatic extremes, it is likely to happen again in the future.

Light pollution is a problem with the existing site, and this will certainly increase if the proposed development and associated car parking etc. is permitted in contravention of ENV49.

6. Conclusions

In summary Linton Parish Council considers that the proposed development is entirely inappropriate on this rural site. If allowed to proceed, it will cause permanent harm to our local environment and serious loss of amenity to Linton residents. It is in obvious breach of numerous provisions and protections contained both in the existing Local Plan and in the proposed new one, and in the National Planning Policy Framework. For these reasons we wish to see the application refused. If it is allowed, it will change the character of Linton forever.

Yours sincerely

[signed]

JR Whitmarsh
Chairman, Linton Parish Council