

Mansfield Local Plan Examination

Representation submitted on behalf of Ransomwood Business Park

Main Matter 7 – Item 5 ... Policy RT6a

We are the owners of the 28 hectare (70 acre) Ransomwood Business Park (“the Business Park”) which is referenced at Main Matter 7 – Item 5 in relation to Policy RT6a and the viability and vitality of Mansfield Town Centre.

The Inspector poses the following question at Item 5:

“Is the scale of retail and leisure development proposed in site allocation RT6a at Ransomwood Business Park justified and would this have any implications for the viability and vitality of Mansfield Town Centre or any of the District and Local Centres?”

Associated Policy RT6b entitled “Frontage to Ransomwood Business Park” allocates a site for approximately 1,750 m² of retail and leisure floorspace. The policy wording states that the future development of the site should consider three key issues, namely:

- how the development meets the needs of the adjacent business park;
- the need to protect and enhance the ability to walk and cycle along Mansfield Way whilst creating a complementary habitat buffer zone; and
- the need to identify and address impacts on the nightjar and woodlark including their habitats.

The principal purpose of Policy RT6b is to support and enhance the important function and attractiveness of the Business Park which is acknowledged within the adopted and emerging Mansfield Local Plan as a crucial employment location within the district.

The RT6b site is currently the subject of a planning application (LPA ref: 2019/0019/FUL) which seeks permission to redevelop the land for dining and catering facilities with an Enterprise car rental unit. This provides a combined total of 663 m² (gross) / 464 m² (net) of main town centre uses (this excludes the Enterprise unit).

The application has been carefully considered and is supported by a comprehensive range of supporting documentation including an economic impact statement and a sequential assessment.

Importantly, the District Council policy officers have offered comments on the application and confirmed on 6 February 2019 that the level of impact predicted to arise from the application proposals would not be adverse. The response states *“it is accepted that this [from the proposal] level of trade diversion would not cause a significant adverse impact upon the town centre.”*

It is worth highlighting that the quantum of floorspace proposed via Policy RT6b falls below the impact threshold identified within the National Planning Policy Framework (2,500 m²) and the level of floorspace proposed by the application falls below the impact threshold (500 m²) contained within the emerging district local plan. Nevertheless, the application has been accompanied by an impact assessment and policy officers have concluded that the proposals would not have a significant adverse impact.

In relation to the sequential approach, a comprehensive assessment has been undertaken in consultation with policy officers adopting an agreed set of criteria. The assessment has concluded that there are no sequentially preferable sites which could accommodate the application proposals.

Given the thrust of Policy RT6b, it is important to understand the background and crucial role performed by the Business Park within the district.

The importance of the Ransom Wood Business Park has been recognised by Mansfield District Council ("the District Council") via ongoing detailed discussions with councillors and senior officers, and also within the emerging local plan which has continually acknowledged the crucial role of the Business Park as a key employment location with the potential for substantial growth. The recently published Mansfield District Local Plan Publication Draft (December 2018) specifically references the Business Park within Policy E3 as a key employment location in the district which should be supported and enhanced.

We acquired the Business Park in 1999 which at the time comprised 40,000 ft² of office accommodation. In 2002/3, a further 20,000 ft² was built and there were 18 tenants and 550 occupants. It was clear that the Business Park had significant potential for growth given its excellent location and sustainable credentials, and we have invested heavily in creating additional office accommodation and infrastructure at the Business Park since this time. The Business Park also contains a popular conference centre which comprises two conference rooms with seating for over 100 delegates and smaller conference rooms with a capacity for an additional 250 delegates. The Business Park lies within an easy and convenient walk of the RT6b site along dedicated and well-lit footpaths.

In 2005, we invested in the Forever Green Restaurant following the grant of planning permission. The size of the building was limited at this time to 3,000 ft² due to the capacity of the existing road network serving the Business Park. Since this time, £250,000 has been invested into a new access arrangement including the roundabout on Southwell Road West at the front door of the site. This investment has enabled the Business Park to continue to expand with new office and commercial development whilst enabling greater public access into the site which is also supported by a woodland access grant given the very special environmental quality of the parkland setting. Members of the public visit our park on a daily basis enjoying leisurely walks through the extensive woodland areas. It is clear that the regeneration of the RT6b site for catering and dining facilities including the Enterprise unit would add much needed provision and variety to the users of the Business Park including tenants, visitors, conference delegates and members of the public fully in accordance with Policy RT6b.

By 2014, we had added a further 9,000 ft² and 34,000 ft² of office accommodation with 85 tenants. At the present time, the Business Park comprises 106,000 ft² of office and commercial accommodation, a growth of nearly 160% since 2000, comprising 90 tenants and c. 1,450 employees on-site.

As highlighted above, we have made substantial and sustained investment in the infrastructure of the Business Park over the past 15 years or so given the support of the District Council, the excellent relationship with existing tenants and the continual growth in new occupier interest. The Business Park makes a hugely valuable contribution to the provision of high quality office and commercial floorspace in the district, and accommodates nearly 1,500 employees in a highly attractive and sustainable location as recognised by the District Council. Nevertheless, we have experienced a reduction in the number of new tenant enquiries over recent times. We are continuing to invest heavily in the Business Park particularly in relation to renewable energy generation and infrastructure but as can be seen above there is a substantial and currently unmet demand for additional dining and catering facilities in the vicinity of the Business Park.

It is clear that the lack of food and catering facilities in the local area is now stifling the growth of the Business Park which is beginning to limit our ability to attract new tenants with the unfortunate consequence of restricting employment generation at this important site alongside the ability to attract new inward investment. The provision of the dining and catering facilities on the Policy RT6b site adjacent to the Business Park represents an excellent opportunity to consolidate and enhance the function of the Business Park. Not only for existing tenants and employees together with the users of the conference centre but also for the 1,400 or so visitors to the tenants each week. In addition, and as recognised by policy officers in their response on 6 February 2019, the provision of an Enterprise vehicle rental unit would help meet demand from the existing businesses which are within an easy and convenient walk of the Business Park.

The Ransomwood Business Park has been transformed over the past 15 years or so into a thriving employment centre following substantial investment based on its excellent locational characteristics which has been fully recognised by the District Council. The Business Park plays a hugely important role in the local area accommodating approximately 1,500 employees and providing purpose built conference facilities which are used by c. 600 delegates per week plus members of the public who enjoy the exceptional quality of the parkland setting. Nevertheless, the limited dining and catering facilities available at the Business Park and in the local area has begun to adversely affect the function of the Business Park and limit the ability to attract new tenants. The provision of new dining and catering facilities as proposed via Policy RT6b would be very welcome and would help to meet a clear and overriding demand within an easy and convenient walk of the Business Park. Given the adjacency of the application site at the front door of the Business Park, there would be a substantial number of potential customers already passing the proposed dining and catering facilities on entering and departing from the Business Park each day in addition to those employees who could walk to the restaurants during the day. It is also worth highlighting that the NHS headquarters is within easy 100 metre walk of the application site.

In summary:

- Policy RT6b would support the economic performance and attractiveness of the Business Park which is explicit within site specific wording of the policy;
- the application proposals currently being assessed by the District Council and which are supported by Policy RT6b are both qualitatively and quantitative distinct from the restaurant/café offer of the town centre;
- the primary aim of Policy RT6b is to serve the local working and residential population in the vicinity of the Business Park and in these terms, policy officers have concluded that the current application proposals supported by Policy RT6b would not divert or defer investment (or expenditure) from the town centre that might be considered adverse; and
- it is important to note that the RT6b proposals fall below the threshold for testing impact set by the National Planning Policy Framework.

Policy RT6b would facilitate the provision of much needed new dining and catering facilities together with an Enterprise unit which would support the continuing success of the Ransomwood Business Park and help facilitate additional inward investment into this important employment location within the district.

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