Response from Jonathan Ash-Edwards to Nick Herbert, by email, 24 July 2019

Dear Nick

Thank you for your email. I have given careful consideration to the issues you raise and will respond to them in turn.

Firstly, although I acknowledge that Hassocks has made a significant contribution to the new homes required in the district, commensurate with its position as one of the larger communities in Mid Sussex, I would like to assure you that the village is not being treated any differently to others in how planning decisions are made. All planning decisions are made by the Council and its Planning Committees in accordance with the policies of the Mid Sussex District Plan, the relevant Neighbourhood Plan (in so far as it has weight), the National Planning Policy Framework and any other relevant material planning considerations.

**Procedural issues**

An additional meeting of the District Planning Committee was placed in the committee diary, and notified to Councillors, three weeks ago in order to facilitate decisions on a number of larger applications which will be required in the coming weeks. It is not uncommon for additional Planning Committee meetings to be scheduled, with the agreement of the Chairman, especially where it is considered beneficial to have single item agendas when applications are likely to have a significant level of public interest and involve a long discussion at the committee meeting. The Council has complied with all relevant procedures in scheduling this meeting.

I can confirm that the Council has not acted to ‘pre-empt’ decisions on either the pending appeal or the Neighbourhood Plan. The Council is under a duty to determine planning applications in a timely manner and is at risk of appeals against non-determination if it does not do so. This planning application was validated on 17th May and the normal 13 week period, by when a decision must be made, expires on 16th August. Neither the pending appeal nor the Neighbourhood Plan will be resolved by that date.

I will avoid commenting on the planning merits, or otherwise, of the current application in order to avoid prejudicing the District Planning Committee’s consideration of it. I would like to reassure you, however, that officers have prepared a detailed report setting out all of the planning considerations the committee will need to consider and the committee will consider all of the representations which have been made.

It is clearly a matter for you as to whether or not to seek the Secretary of State’s intervention and I respect the consideration you will give to this as the constituency MP.

My only comment as you weigh this up is that I think it would be unfortunate if locally elected, accountable Councillors, who have demonstrated considerable knowledge, thought and care on applications on this site in the past, were replaced as the decision makers by a Planning Inspector from out of the area. Equally, a call in would result in the decision not being made by a local Planning Committee which is accessible for members of the public to attend and speak at, but through a Public Inquiry dominated by expensive barristers rather than local people.

**Hassocks Neighbourhood Plan**

As you are aware, we have placed great emphasis on Neighbourhood Plans in Mid Sussex and have supported 16 parishes to get to the point of having a made Neighbourhood Plan, almost all of which moved quickly to get a Plan in place without significant difficulties. Communities which have a made Neighbourhood Plan, such as Hurstpierpoint & Sayers Common in your constituency, have seen the benefits of planning decisions being made in line with their policies and aspirations.

It should be a matter of regret for all involved that the Hassocks Neighbourhood Plan has not followed the same straight forward trajectory. Having started their Neighbourhood Plan work much later than other parishes, the Parish Council has consistently failed to submit a plan which fully conforms to the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework. Despite numerous meetings and advice being provided by the Council’s planning officers, many of these issues still need to be resolved and will ultimately fall to the Neighbourhood Plan Examiner to decide.

The Regulation 16 version of the Neighbourhood Plan was published for consultation on 22nd July and, in line with standard practice, Members of the District Planning Committee will receive an update sheet before the meeting which will set out the current policy position and the weight they can give to the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Council will continue in its endeavours to assist the Parish Council in getting an adopted Neighbourhood Plan in place as soon as possible so that Hassocks can join the vast majority of communities across Mid Sussex in benefiting from having a Neighbourhood Plan.

**Planning context and 5 year housing land supply**

While writing, I want to take the opportunity to brief you on a wider concern which is likely to be thrown up by the appeal commencing in September.

The Council was greatly appreciative of the time and trouble you and Sir Nicholas took to speak at the Public Examination of the Mid Sussex District Plan, in support of the Plan and the work the Council has done to put in place a 5 year housing land supply. I know you are conscious of the significant work and cost to the taxpayer involved in this and the importance of ensuring that Mid Sussex both plans proactively for new homes and protects the district from uncontrolled, speculative development. The Council continues to work to ensure that a rolling 5 year supply of sites for new homes is in place.

However, in the pending appeal, Rydon Homes has instructed a senior QC to represent them and has made very clear their intention to challenge the Council’s 5 year housing land supply. It is a priority of the Council to protect the 5 year housing land supply position and as such has instructed Paul Brown QC to defend the appeal for the Council.

Whilst Mr Brown has advised that the Council’s position on the 5 year housing land supply appears robust, he has pointed out that we have not yet seen Rydon’s evidence on this issue, and that there is no guarantee that the Council will be successful.

Allowing the Council to determine the current planning application this week, without the delay which would be caused by a call in by the Secretary of State, would bring certainty to the planning status of this site and assist the Council in its efforts to both protect the taxpayer in the appeal proceedings and the 5 year housing land supply position, which is in the overwhelming interest of residents of Hassocks and across Mid Sussex.

I will ensure that this correspondence is made available to the members of the Planning Committee.

Best wishes,

Jonathan

Councillor Jonathan Ash-Edwards

Leader of Mid Sussex District Council