South Downs National Park Preferred Options Local Plan September 2015

The Friends of Lewes Society is the civic society for Lewes which was founded over 60 years ago and has about 500 members. It welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Preferred Options Local Plan.

The Society supports the development of an integrated local plan for the whole of the South Downs National Park and recognises the challenge of producing a comprehensive plan that covers a large geographic area, promotes National Park purposes and meets the individual needs of different areas. It supports the overall structure and principles promoted in the plan and the recognition that the historic market town of Lewes is of strategic importance within the National Park and has its own particular needs.

1. **Core Policies**
The Society supports the Core Policies SD1: Sustainable development; SD2: Ecosystems services; SD3: Major development and SD4/SS: The Scarp Slope.

2. **Strategic Policies**
The Society has no objection to the policies that are relevant to Lewes with the exceptions that follow below.

The Society welcomes the overall aim of Strategic Policy SD5: Landscape Character and the principle that development proposals that would have an adverse impact on the character of the landscape will be refused. It supports paragraph 2(b) which recognises that appropriate planting should be consistent with local character and that new planting should be native species, unless there are appropriate and justified reasons to select non-native species. With climate change and the continuing occurrence of alien diseases and parasites (DED, Ash die-back, Chestnut canker, Oak processioneer moth, Phytophthera etc) it may well be preferable to plant non-native species in some instances.

In paragraph 4, relating to the character of the immediate and wider landscape, it considers the word “unacceptable” [adverse impact] should be removed because it weakens the policy and the impact should be quantified through compliance with other Strategic Policies. The same word occurs in other policies in a similar context and should be removed from them for the same reasons.

The Society supports the principle of Strategic Policy SD6: Design, but has concerns that the meaning of the phrase in 2a) “make a positive contribution to the character …” could be open to wide interpretation and debate. It suggests amending this phrase to “respect the character …” would strengthen the policy wording.

The Society welcomes and supports Strategic Policy SD7: Safeguarding Views and the policy provision that proposals having an unacceptable adverse impact on the special quality of the National Park will be refused.

The Society supports Strategic Policy SD9: Dark Night Skies and the criteria proposed to ensure that lighting in development proposals is appropriate.

The Society supports the approach proposed for the provision of housing in the National Park and accepts the need for more housing, including affordable and social housing, in Lewes. It strongly believes the development of brownfield sites should be exhausted before new greenfield sites are promoted. It therefore objects to the figure of 835 homes for Lewes in Policy SD23: Housing and the level of housing since this includes 200 houses proposed for the greenfield site at Old Malling Farm (see para 3 below). It is also not consistent with the supporting evidence in the SHLAA, which identifies sites to accommodate 652 homes. The Society considers that an extensive review of the SHLAA should be undertaken to find additional brownfield sites as an alternative to the greenfield allocation at Old Malling Farm.

The Society supports Strategic Policy SD28: Employment Land.

The Society supports Strategic Policy SD29(2) : Town and Village Centres but considers the scope of uses in paragraph 2c) should be broadened to reflect the role Lewes has as a market town serving a wider rural area and its need to make provision for commercial facilities. It proposes the following amendment:

c) Other appropriate uses within the town and village centres including tourism, cultural, commercial and leisure facilities will be supported so long as these do not harm the retail function of the town centre.

The Society broadly supports the principles set out in Strategic Site Policy SD34: North Street and Eastgate, Lewes which reflect its position contained in representations to planning application SDNP/15/01146/FUL. However, although the provision of 415 residential units will go a long way towards meeting the need for new housing in Lewes the Society maintains its position that the density of the development could, and should be increased to make greater housing provision. In addition, although 40% of the residential units will be at rent levels defined by national and local planning policies as ‘affordable’, the Society considers they will be beyond the financial means of most local people in need of such accommodation and policy provision should be made for houses and flats at truly social rents within the development. It therefore objects to paragraph 1a) of the policy and proposes the following amendment:

a) approximately a minimum of 415 residential units, predominantly focused towards the northern part of the site, of which 40 per cent should be affordable and include units to be let at social rents;

3. Site Allocations
The Society objects to Policy SD-SS03: Old Malling Farm, Lewes for the reasons given in its representations objecting to the proposed modifications to the Lewes District Council Joint
Core Strategy: Spatial Policy 4 – Old Malling Farm, Lewes. These representations form part of our objection to Policy SD-SS03 and are given in Appendix 1.

In addition, and in the context of the SDNP Preferred Option Local Plan, the Society considers the site allocation in Policy SD-SS03 to be contrary to Strategic Policies SD5: Landscape Character, SD7: Safeguarding Views and SD9: Dark Night Skies.

4. Development Management Policies
The Society broadly supports the scope and details of the development management policies proposed, which will be important in the assessment and determination of planning applications within the National Park.

However para 6 of SD22: Development Strategy, is rather weak and a stronger statement is needed that brownfield land should be developed in preference to greenfield land.

The Society supports Development Management Policies SD39: Conservation Areas, SD41: Archaeology, SD43: Public Realm and Highway Design and SD52: Shop Fronts

The Society supports Development Management Policy SD45: Replacement Dwellings and Extensions, but has particular concerns that garden annexes in Lewes can evolve to become separate dwellings with time. It therefore suggests paragraph 2f) of this policy should be strengthened to read:

f) in the case of annexes, as well as the above, it is ancillary, has a functional or physical dependency to the main dwelling and is in the same ownership

Although the Society supports the aims of Development Management Policy SD52: Shop Fronts it has concerns that the policy does not continue the provisions of extant policy ST29 of the Lewes District Council Local Plan with respect to illuminated signage in the Lewes Conservation Area. It therefore proposes the following amendment:

3. There will be a presumption against internally illuminated signage/logos and solid shutters or any other feature which obscures window displays, unless this is a traditional feature of a historic premise and is outside the Conservation Area.

The Society supports the aims of Development Management Policy SD55: Advertisements and Signage, but considers the wording weakens the provisions of extant policy ST29 of the Lewes District Council Local Plan with respect to illuminated advertisements in the Lewes Conservation Area. It therefore proposes the following amendment to clarify and strengthen paragraph 2:

2) Advertisement consent will not be granted for illuminated advertisement signs on listed buildings or within Conservation Areas if would have an adverse impact on the special qualities.

Friends of Lewes Society

October 2015
Appendix 1 - Policy SD-SS03: Old Malling Farm

Joint representations made with the South Downs Society to the proposed modifications to the Lewes District Council Joint Core Strategy: Spatial Policy 4 – Old Malling Farm, Lewes

Friends of Lewes and the South Downs Society (the Societies) object to Spatial Policy 4 for inclusion of Old Malling Farm, Lewes as a strategic housing site allocation.

This site has previously been considered, but rejected, for housing development as it is a greenfield site of high landscape quality, outside the current development boundary and is very visible from the western side of the Ouse valley north of Lewes. Development would reduce the green finger of land that comes into Lewes from the north and diminish the landscape attraction that Lewes has as a gap town surrounded by the Downs. In addition, the fields on which development is proposed provide the link between Malling Deanery and Old Malling Farm which in mediaeval times was a busy religious centre containing a palace used by the Archbishop of Canterbury and it is highly likely that undiscovered archaeological remains lie underneath. They are also Grade II agricultural land which is in short supply in the National Park. At the public inquiry for the inclusion of Lewes in the South Downs National Park similar reasons were put forward and these were accepted by that Inspector in his recommendation to Government.

Nothing has changed since the Secretary of State's confirmation of the National Park in 2009 to justify development on the site and the June 2014 Lewes District Council (LDC)/South Downs National Park (SDNPA) Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) is clear in its conclusion that development at Old Malling Farm is unacceptable due to the high landscape character sensitivity and altering of its relationship with the Ouse Valley. The subsequent January 2015 South Downs National Park SHLAA is also very clear in its conclusion for this site that “development on the site would have a potential adverse impact on the character and appearance of the landscape. Development on this site would have a potential adverse impact on heritage assets.”

The Societies consider the impact of potential development at Old Malling Farm would be:

1. The eastern side of the valley is undeveloped beyond the Malling Deanery Conservation Area which has a particular village and edge of countryside quality from which development would be likely to detract. The Conservation Area description clearly states that the relationship between the paddock to the east of the church, which provides views out to the wider countryside (the site) to the north, is important in terms of its setting. Development would therefore either change these views into views of housing, or truncate them with screening planting, either of which is unsatisfactory and does not support the National Park purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area.

2. The experience of walking the Ouse Valley Way (OVW) would be affected by development to an unacceptable degree. The limit of development on the east side of the river in this location is currently the former railway line to Uckfield which, largely located in cutting and with the tree belt that has grown alongside it, forms a robust
screen and framework to the development along Old Malling Way. The impacts on users of the OVW would be to introduce visual impact from development on the higher levels of the site which would be in contrast to the rural outlook which currently exists. This would compete with the skyline views of Lewes castle and church at the northern end of the Pells. These are currently the only buildings which break the skyline above the tree line.

3. Tranquility is a quality of the landscape which increases along the valley floor as one travels north out of Lewes on the OVW. At present the eastern bank and the valley spur which includes the site helps to create this rural setting. Housing development at Old Malling Farm would effectively restrict this experience and bring the impacts of the town further out into the rural area to a marked degree. The exposure of the site to the OVW is extensive along all of the western side and the northern extent of the valley side spur for approximately 1.3km. The degree of change in the transition from countryside to town that would result from development would be unacceptable.

4. The site is also very visible from the isolated and very tranquil Hamsey Church which is separated by the river from Old Malling Farm but is nevertheless close to it. Whilst Landport and the railway to the west of the OVW are a direct contrast, these are less visible and audible from the path. The railway is mostly visible and audible during the passage of trains which have an occasional rather than continuous impact.

5. The development of the site would require significant belts of tree planting in order to be screened and it is considered that this would be contrary and inconsistent with landscape character given the age of the fieldscapes (1400-1600AD). Visual impact and landscape character impacts would be increased during autumn and winter following leaf fall.

6. Whatever screening is provided the site would still be very visible from the high points on the downs to the west of the valley such as Offham Hill and the Landport Bottom access land. From these viewpoints the fields that form the site are seen as part of the green tongue of high quality landscape going into Lewes as part of the river valley.

7. The need for street lighting in the development will result in increased light pollution in the area that is likely to have an impact on tranquillity and dark skies in this prominent location.

8. Development would increase the vehicular traffic in Old Malling Way as the proposed entrance to the site is at its northern end. This would also increase the impact of the development from Hamsey Church. Even though it is proposed that the old bridge to Old Malling Farm should be used as a pedestrian route into the site, it is still some way from the nearest shop opposite Police HQ, as well as the town centre of Lewes and it does not therefore seem an appropriate site for a high percentage of affordable housing.

We therefore strongly contend that development on this site would be detrimental to the setting of Lewes in its position as a gap town in the National Park whilst the impacts on the nearby section of the Ouse Valley Way and the transition from countryside to town would
be unacceptable. Furthermore, the views from surrounding higher ground, particularly to
the west, are also likely to be significantly affected. It would also negate one of the reasons
for including the town of Lewes within the National Park.
Paragraph 13 of the August 2015 Proposed Modifications Background Paper Old Malling
Farm, Lewes (MM05), makes the point that mitigation proposals which rely on screening
suggest that such a development is flawed from the outset and that just because you cannot
see something does not necessarily mean it is acceptable. The Societies agree and share the
concerns expressed that if the approach proposed is taken, the character of the area could
be adversely affected by screening planting; it would also reduce the enjoyment of the two
fields within the landscape and reduce the impact of the spur and the approach to Lewes
along the Ouse Valley Way.

The Societies have seen no evidence that demonstrates that the mitigation measures
proposed in Spatial Policy 4 will be successful. At best they are likely to be only partially
successful due to the topographic limitations on screening from higher ground and autumn
leaf fall. This is supported by the August 2015 South Downs National Park Sustainability
Appraisal (SA) of the South Downs Local Plan. It concludes with respect to the impact of
development at Old Malling Farm on the Landscape that “While the policy approach will
help limit effects on visual amenity, the development of this green field site will have
inevitable and potentially significant effects, on landscape quality.” In addition the SA also
concludes with respect to Cultural Heritage that “inevitable effects on the setting of the
[Malling Deanery] conservation area and [five] listed buildings are likely to take place.”

We therefore do not consider the August 2015 Lewes District Local Plan Addendum to the
Sustainability Appraisal to be sound as it is based on assumptions that the policy criteria of
Spatial Policy 4 will succeed in reducing or removing the adverse impacts of development.
We believe the supporting evidence behind the Sustainability Appraisal should be the
subject of further testing through an Examination in Public.

National Planning Policy Guidance paragraphs 115 explicitly states that “Great weight
should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks...which have
the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty. The conservation
of wildlife and cultural heritage are important considerations in all these areas, and should
be given great weight...” Whilst agreeing with the need for affordable housing in Lewes the
Societies do not concur with the Inspector’s Interim Findings that development at Old
Malling Farm would help provide a better balance in respect of meeting the social and
economic needs of the town and the National Park. They are not convinced that “no stone
has been left unturned” by the two planning authorities in terms of seeking as many
appropriate sites as possible for new housing that are realistically deliverable in sustainable
locations across the plan area. In that connection the Societies accept the concept of
developing brown field sites for housing subject to the design being appropriate.

The Societies strongly maintain that development at Old Malling Farm risks significant
damage to the landscape of Lewes in the context of the National Park, and, if agreed, would
be a damaging precedent that could be used in favour of developing other greenfield sites in
this and other National Parks.