

Geo Code: 328940 197554

**Residential development and ancillary retail and community development
landscaping and highways (1200 dwellings approx)
Land West of Cwmbran Drive, South Sebastopol, Cwmbran/Pontypool**

It would be appreciated if the following observations could be taken into account when the above application is considered by the Council.

**Response by TORFAEN FRIENDS OF THE EARTH to
South Sebastopol Proposals.**

General

1. Those who opposed the original designation of this land for development in the Council's Local Plan have been vindicated. It was argued by objectors at the Public Inquiry there was no need for the allocation, that there was sufficient land elsewhere to meet housing needs, and that the Council's housing land requirement calculations were bloated and incorrect.
2. The experience of the last decade has shown that the objectors were right, and the Council was wrong. Not a single dwelling has been built on the proposed South Sebastopol development area in the intervening period, but the Council area has not experienced a shortage of housing land in the interim.
3. The land is promoted once again as a new development area again in the deposit LDP (policy SAA6), with provision made for 1200 dwellings. The period for public consultation on this policy, and on other aspects of the LDP, is yet to expire. It would clearly be premature if the current planning application were to be determined prior to the policy provisions of the LDP being tested for soundness at a public examination. Of particular concern, is the Council's predicted housing requirement for the 15 years of the Plan period, which is almost double the number of houses built within the Borough in the previous 15 years. The Council is repeating the error made in its Local Plan.
4. The Council's Local Plan is out of date, and the LDP is yet to be examined and statutorily adopted. In the circumstances it is considered that the advice contained in para 2.6.3 of PPW on prematurity should be followed.
5. It is beyond dispute that the whole of the South Sebastopol allocation is not required for the period of the LDP, and the LDP recognises this to be the case. Moreover, as made clear in LDP policy S5, the LDP makes an over-allocation in housing provision for Torfaen of 20%, a figure roughly equivalent to the South Sebastopol allocation. There are those who consider the provisions of policy S5 to be unsound, for this reason. The Council has not made a persuasive case that the release of the South Sebastopol land is justified in its LDP.
6. FOE object to the principle of the release of this land at least until the LDP has been publicly examined, and the Inspector's report received. FOE is of the view that there is no justifiable case for the release of the land now, and that the current application should be held in abeyance until the outcome of the LDP exercise is known. The application has already been held in abeyance for a period of 5 years or so, and a further period of abeyance would not cause harm. The apparent 'rush' for a decision is at the behest of the applicants, for commercial reasons; the Council should not accede.

The application

7. The application is described as ‘refreshed’, but the current proposals are different in character to the original. It is true that the housing elements of both are similar, but the original application (and the LP allocation) was promoted on the basis that a community or village was to be evolved. Many objectors were sceptical of that promotional issue, and their fears have not proved unfounded.
8. Although the current application contains some window dressing, the development in essence is a large housing estate on an unspoilt greenfield site, unsustainably dislocated from all essential services. The development represents the antithesis of what the Welsh Assembly Government seeks to promote in terms of sustainable development (para 4.1.6 & 4.4.2 Planning Policy Wales)
9. It is considered shameful, for this reason, that the Welsh Assembly Government should lend its name to this application. Moreover, the ‘refreshed’ application vehicle is seen a cynical attempt by the applicants to circumvent the provisions and requirements of TAN 22 with regard to the Code for Sustainable Homes. By not insisting on a fresh planning application, the Council has foregone approx £150,000 in statutory planning fees. It is important in FOE’s view, that those responsible for this decision provide a meaningful justification.
10. The amendments made, and the changes in national policy and regulations, justified a fresh planning application, and the FOE will look seriously to mounting a legal challenge to any permission granted.

PARTICULAR

- 1 WAG housing requirement for Torfaen LDP until 2015 reduced from 7000 to 5000 houses, but Duncan Smith advise build 6000, to “buck the trend of downward population levels”, by inward migration and “South Sebastopol is our economic driver”

(TFOE believes that there are not the jobs locally to warrant this and that the future revenue from local taxation will be outweighed by extra burden on services. The alternative site of Mamhilad with capacity for 1700 houses, proposed to the Council by TFOE in December 2005, and now accepted by the Council into the new Torfaen Local Development Plan negates the need for the South Sebastopol development. Further more, the cost of the majority of these houses would only be affordable by well established, possibly middle aged owners, who are more likely to require specific services sooner.)

- 2 Size of developments must be able to reflect the existing road network capacity.

(TFOE affirms that local roads cannot cope with projected 2500 – 3000 extra cars, plus service vehicles, particularly since road improvement budgets in local and national government have been slashed. TFOE believes that the original figure of 1200 houses should be revised in the light of these problems).

- 3 The Inspector at the Public Inquiry favoured the whole of the site to be developed as the community facilities, i.e., the school, etc, provided in the S106 would create a village and not just a large housing development.

(TFOE believes that the raison d’etre for development of the whole acreage, i.e. to create a village, has been eroded by the non-provision of a school. Furthermore, the plan as displayed in the revised plan does not provide availability of future land should a school eventually be required. TFOE re-states that the original figure of 1200 houses should be

revised in view of this fact as it would seem that this is no longer a village concept but housing sprawl.)

- 4 This is being regarded as a “refreshed” application and not a new application. This move seeks to circumvent the WAG policy on Code for Sustainable Homes, which applies to new build homes, and to which developments in the Torfaen LDP currently out for public consultation, will be subject to. South Sebastopol is part of the new LDP and would seem to be the only area not regarded by the Council as being under the same conditions.

(Torfaen FOE maintains the view that this inconsistency undermines the Council’s position on sustainable developments and climate change policy).

- 5 The removal of the bridge from the listed canal tunnel, as shown in the revised plan, is cynically done as the proposed roads and development close to and abutting each side of the tunnel remain. In the draft plan shown to the public in November 2010, based on the draft plan which the Council considered in December 2004, the land leading from the tunnel on both sides in an east/west direction, maintained the beautiful and iconic views across the site at this point. This was recognised by the developers previous representatives as worthy of preservation.

(Torfaen FOE believes that keeping the roads and development so close to the tunnel is suspicious in that the tunnel could still be breached in the future as the road layout would suggest. Furthermore the wildlife which uses this corridor would be compromised. The Council’s proposed Canal Corridor policy could be compromised if approval was granted of the proposed layout at this point. The linear park featured in the previous master plan which was accepted by the Council in 2003 should be restored to the current draft plan as the views were considered highly valuable together with large area of open space for the benefit of the community. It is a lovely feature from which new residents would benefit.)

- 6 The two secondary access roads off Lowlands Road and Oaklands Road, are not suitable because of existing traffic problems. It is questionable that the Oaklands access can be improved without loss of existing properties. The Lowlands access, even with traffic lights and new layout would not overcome the danger that exists at this point. There is potential danger of secondary accesses being used as “rat runs “ when traffic peak hour build up is experienced on Cwmbran Drive and trunk road.. Traffic is already diverting through Pontnewydd and Upper Cwmbran to circumvent Cwmbran Town Centre bottle neck at peak hours.

(Torfaen FOE believes that as well as traffic problems, that an increase of CO2 will be inflicted on the existing residents as the proposed roads across the development are above the height of the settled communities around the perimeter of the site. Lowlands already suffers from significant pollution).

- 7 The NEAPS and LEAPS envisaged on the proposed plan are of particular concern to existing residents around this site as fear of night time vandalism is a valid one, bearing in mind what has happened to other play facilities in other parts of Cwmbran and Sebastopol. Although situated where they can be overseen by proposed new homes, this does not prevent the problem arising. Anti-social behaviour between rival gangs of youths at either end of South Sebastopol has been kept at bay because of the open fields in between. This view was expressed to TFOE by such a young man.

(TFOE believes that the Council should listen to its existing residents, especially young people who know the situation on the ground better than any one else. Large open play areas are preferable as children are more likely to create their own games using their imagination. Also, the children of Five Locks Close cannot access these proposed play areas without crossing the roads on this site).

- 8 With the economic downturn, the rate at which the new houses would be purchased could be slowed down leaving a part-developed site for many years.

(TFOE believes that this is a real fear among residents and that new homeowners would be left in limbo without the support facilities promised).

- 9 The proposed walk ways through woodland is to be discouraged as, unlike large tracts of woodland that can cope with human intervention, these small areas, coupled with reduced natural areas generally over the site, cannot sustain safe habitats for wildlife.

(TFOE proposes that this proposal be deleted from the plan)

- 10 In view of the acreage under development, the wildlife habitats are severely under threat even with a sympathetic management programme during and post development.

(TFOE believes that the acreage of development and the number of houses proposed should be reduced to accommodate more areas of habitat to protect wildlife)

- 11 The height of some of the homes as four storeys is too intrusive on such a beautiful site. In the previous plan accepted by council, maximum height was stated as 3 storeys. It is difficult for local people to envisage the impact and they are scared of what is being proposed.

(TFOE believes that there should be a cap on the height of the buildings and that a scaled model of the whole “village” should be put before the public for consultation before any permission is granted by the Council).

- 12 Professor David Austin advised that further historical surveys be carried out prior to acceptance of development layout. This would serve as a community led project to the educational benefit of existing communities and that a precautionary policy should be adopted.

(TFOE believes that the advice of Professor Austin should be accepted as he is a highly regarded and internationally recognised authority and that proper site investigation be carried out before outline permission is granted. A Lydart aerial survey should be first undertaken. Absence of proof is not proof of absence.)

- 13 There is a threat to light pollution of the night sky, which local people value on this site for observance of the universe, as evidenced by a local scout leader to TFOE.

(TFOE believe that lighting should be kept to a minimum and that LED/low impact lighting should be implemented.)

Signed -----

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