

Written evidence submitted by Friends of Meon Vale Woodland Walk (TPW0053)

I am submitting this evidence on behalf of the Friends of Meon Vale Woodland Walk. The Group has been set up in 2020 by residents of Meon Vale to campaign against proposals by St Modwen Developments to destroy 10 ha of deciduous accessible woodland in the heart of the new community of Meon Vale, Warwickshire in order to develop 300 houses.

Summary

We are submitting evidence as a case study to demonstrate that there is not adequate protection to woodland in England. It is particularly painful for the community of Meon Vale at this time when the government is launching a programme to promote tree planting as part of its actions on the climate emergency for our community to be threatened with the loss of 10 hectares of woodland containing about 3000 native deciduous trees. The landowner / developer is stating that the destruction of the heart of the woodland is justified because of the overriding need to provide land for housing.

Background

The new community of Meon Vale is five miles south of Stratford upon Avon. The former MOD site of the Long Marston Depot was acquired in 2008 by St Modwen Developments. Original proposals were for the development of an ecotown. However as the programme was not taken forward, the redevelopment of the site has progressed under the current Planning and Building Regulations.

At the heart of the former MOD is an area of woodland that was planted by the MOD about 50 – 60 years ago; about half the woodland is a plantation of native oak with some pine trees. The remainder is an area of semi-natural grassland with avenues and copses of native trees. In total it has an area of 14 hectares.

The woodland provides important screening and noise baffling around the adjacent general industrial areas within the former MOD site. These contain large industrial sheds and the Quinton Rail Technology Centre. The latter is recognised as an important centre for the development of new rail technologies including the Hydrogen Train. The woodland provides separation between the industrial areas and the new residential areas. It also provides a wind break to the new community. A woodland walk has been provided under a planning condition to create an accessible green space and this is proving popular with local residents for exercise and mental de-stressing and well-being.

The Proposal to Destroy the heart of the Woodland

St Modwens Development has received planning permission for the development of the new community of Meon Vale. This is currently for 1050 houses and about half of these have been built or are under construction. New community facilities have been provided as required by the planning permission at an early stage of the development. A number of ponds have been created as SuDS and improvements have been made to the stream running through the development site. All were required by planning conditions.

The whole of the former depot site, including the woodland and adjacent grassland, was identified as a potential Local Wildlife Site. It is not clear why the formal designation has not been carried out. The woodland and grassland area is safeguarded by a clause in Stratford District Council's Core Strategy policy governing the redevelopment of the Former MOD Depot. Environmental Management Plans have been approved subsequent to the Environmental Impact Assessment of the

development. The woodland has been cited as a good practice case study in the Council's SPD on Development Requirements and Climate Change.

There have been several ecological surveys of the area which have identified Protected Species including water vole, several species of bats, great crested newts, toads and lizards. The woodland is also identified by Natural England as Protected Habitat as deciduous woodland.

The woodland has a well established biodiversity and is home for a large number of species of birds both nesting and wintering as well as badgers, deer, butterflies, dragonflies and other insects and amphibians.

Yet despite all the NPPF policies on the importance of safeguarding environmental assets and the Council's policies and conditions on the planning permissions for the re-development which safeguard the woodland, the owners, St Modwen Developments have put forward a proposal to the Council's Call for Sites for 300 homes on a 10ha site in the heart of the woodland that would require the felling of approximately 3000 trees, leaving only narrow peripheral tree belts around part of the site.

The developers have undertaken a concerted campaign to convince the Council officers and Members that the site is readily deliverable, that bio-diversity net gain can be achieved by enhancing the ponds required for SuDs and that the woodland walk can be repositioned in the fragmented peripheral tree belt. The Council has carried out what we consider to be a flawed and erroneous assessment of the implications of the development in their SEA and has now included the proposal in its Preferred Options Site Allocations Plan.

The new community of Meon Vale is incredulous that the proposal can be taken seriously by the Council. They have a 7 year housing land supply. However the developers are selling the proposal by highlighting the possible implications for the Council of the Government's draft proposals for calculating the housing requirement which would have serious ramifications on this Council area, possibly with a requirement for them to find an additional 1000 houses per annum.

The developers, St Modwens, have already had success with this approach by ripping the heart out of a woodland at Heathy Woods, Copthorne in Mid Sussex. It appears to be a business model they are seeking to replicate in Meon Vale.

It is incredible at a time when the government is promoting the planting of millions of trees, the pressure to find sites for house building can be used by developers to justify destroying thousands of trees.

It appears that the protective legislation is skewed towards safeguarding ancient woodland and veteran trees. There is little interest in safeguarding newer woodlands. In fact it is these newer woodland from recent decades that are now most effective in capturing carbon from our atmosphere.

It is important not only to promote the planting of new trees and woodlands but to ensure that they are retained for the benefit of future generations. We are suggesting that there should be a presumption against development, particularly of housing, on woodland of any age. The NPPF and other Government policy and guidance should be amended accordingly.

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