Proposal: North Benfleet Neighbourhood Development Order for a residential-led development (300 dwellings) with commercial/community buildings and internal roads

Secretary of State's case reference: PCU/EIASCR/V1505/3342157

Schedule and category of development: 10b Urban development project

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF REASONS (FOR SCREENING DIRECTION)

The Secretary of State ("SoS") has considered whether the above proposal is likely to have significant environmental effects. She has undertaken this screening, taking into account the criteria set out in Schedule 3 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017. In doing so she considers the main matters to be addressed for development of this type are those set out in Planning Practice Guidance ("PPG"), including with regard to cumulative impact for this proposal as follows; physical scale, potential increase in traffic, emissions and noise.

Given the information available, the Secretary of State has also considered whether the above proposal is likely to have significant environmental effects, in respect of flood risk and landscape and visual impact, considering these and the other main matters in cumulative terms. The site's proximity to sensitive designated sites and heritage assets in the locality have also been considered.

The proposal is coming forward through the North Benfleet Neighbourhood Development Order ("NDO") and the Secretary of State is screening the proposal as she would any other planning project under the EIA regulations.

Regarding the Characteristics of Development

The NDO area ("NDOA") consists of 79.8 ha of partially developed land. The proposal involves a combination of infill and multi plot development, over five phases, including a loop road to provide access to currently undeveloped parts of the NDOA. There will be an increase in the density of built development, particularly in the northern part of the NDOA and new dwellings will be a maximum of two storeys. There will be a change to the built form of the area, through the addition of housing near existing residential development within North Benfleet and there is the potential for cumulative impacts with existing and approved development in Bowers Gifford. There would be a short-term increase in the volume of Heavy Goods Vehicles on the highway network during construction. However, this would be of short term duration and in a number of separate, distinct phases. Each phase would include a Construction Environment Management Plan ("CEMP") which would include measures to minimise dust, pollution, noise and vibration and manage construction traffic. During operation, there is the potential for air quality and noise impacts associated with increased vehicle movements.

Regarding the Location of Development

The NDOA consists of two parcels of land within North Benfleet, with existing residential development (known as the Plotlands), some commercial premises, large paddocks, fields and ponds. The majority of development is to the south, comprising of an incomplete grid system of back-to-back plots with low density, detached properties and intervening vegetation. The NDOA adjoins Bowers Gifford and the urban edge of Basildon is 500m to the west. There are limited facilities within walking distance. Basildon and South Benfleet have a wide range of amenities. The surrounding land is

mainly in agricultural use. The NDOA is within the London Area Green Belt, albeit the SoS notes the designation is not made for environmental purposes.

Parts of the NDOA are in Flood Zones ("FZ") 2 and 3 and it is within a Critical Drainage Area. A designated main river Rawreth Brook and a number of small surface waterbodies are located in the northern part of the NDOA and surrounding it, including the North Benfleet Brook. The NDOA is subject to surface water flooding

The NDOA is located in the North Benfleet and Nevendon Settled Claylands landscape character area, characterised by the dispersed nature of settlement, flat landform, plotlands, unadopted and unsurfaced roads, grazed and arable fields, mature hedgerow boundaries and small woodlands.

The site is not located within a sensitive area as defined by the EIA Regulations 2017. The nearest designated site is Pitsea Marsh Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), approximately 1.8km southwest. The site is within the zone of influence of the Benfleet and Southend Marshes Special Protections Area (SPA)/Ramsar site, 4.3km southeast. Impacts from the development are likely to be largely from recreational disturbance (see cumulative impacts below), however, Natural England ("NE") is satisfied that the proposed development is unlikely to have any significant effects on statutorily designated sites, including Pitsea Marsh and Benfleet and Southend Marshes sites. Having considered the available information, including NE's views, the SoS considers that significant effects on protected areas is unlikely.

There is a Grade II listed building, Tiffayne's Farmhouse, in the north-east corner of the NDOA, as well as several other listed buildings in the vicinity. Moated site and fishponds at Botelers Scheduled Monument is 3.3km to the west. From the information provided, Historic England ("HE") considers it is unlikely the proposals will have significant effects on the historic environment. Based on the available information, including HE's views, the SoS considers that significant impacts on heritage assets are unlikely.

Regarding the Characteristics of Potential Impact

Increase in traffic

There will be additional road movements compared to the existing conditions as a result of the development, both during construction and from new residents, once operational. The proposal will deliver a new loop road which will interface with existing road and footpath networks to improve connectivity across the site and create a hierarchy of streets. This will also improve pedestrian and cycle connections into the wider footpath network and access to Basildon. Land Use Consultants Ltd (LUC), appointed by Basildon Borough Council, state it is unclear whether impacts from construction traffic and on existing junction operation in the wider area have been considered. The Transport Technical Note states that the impact on the local highway network would be noticeable and could possibly trigger the need for consideration of junction improvements. A Transport Assessment ("TA") will be submitted for each mini masterplan, the scope of which will be approved by the Local Highways Authority. The initial TA will model the main access junction for future phases and consider potential junction improvements. Impacts during construction will be temporary and can be managed through a CEMP. The SoS considers that although patterns of road use will be affected, on the basis of the available information, including the introduction of the new loop road and sustainable transport improvements, a significant effect is unlikely in this regard.

Emissions

The site is not within an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). The development is unlikely to generate hazardous substances or toxic emissions. LUC consider there is a high risk that an increase in nitrogen dioxide generated by an increase in traffic could

have a significant effect on air quality. Whilst there would likely be an increase in traffic on local roads and resultant emissions as a result of the development, the SoS considers this is unlikely to give rise to significant effects on air quality, due to the scale of the development.

Noise
LUC considers there is insufficient information to screen out noise and vibration impacts. A noise assessment will be required. Construction impacts will be temporary and would be managed in line with established best practice, delivered through a CEMP. The SoS considers that once the development is completed, noise is unlikely to be over and above what would be expected in a typical semi-rural residential area and impacts are unlikely to be significant.

Flood risk
LUC consider there is insufficient information to screen out flood risk. The Environment Agency ("EA") did not express a view on whether EIA is needed in this regard. It notes that the development includes 'More vulnerable' and 'Less vulnerable' development, as defined in PPG and if it isn't possible to locate all development in FZ 1, then the most vulnerable elements should be located in the lowest risk areas. A Flood Risk Assessment ("FRA"), including sustainable drainage systems and drainage strategy is required and the development will need to pass the sequential and exceptions tests. The FRA should demonstrate how the development will not make this risk worse. Flood risk management plans will be prepared prior to occupation. A drainage strategy will be produced to manage and mitigate any potential risks from surface water flooding. The Design Code states that open space on plots should be largely permeable to mitigate flood risk and environmental impacts. A small area of FZ 2 has been included for development as it is centrally located, with the potential for open space and local centre non-residential uses. All residential development will be in FZ 1 areas. The SoS considers that based on the available information, proposed mitigation and the position of the EA, a significant environmental effect is unlikely in this regard.

Landscape and Visual Impact
LUC considers more detail is required on the Design Code and mitigation and enhancements to reduce landscape and visual effects. The development will not exceed two storeys and the Design Code will provide restrictions on layout, scale and massing to ensure that the character of North Benfleet is not adversely impacted and that the development is in keeping with the existing character of the Plotlands. Mini Masterplans will be required to prepare a Landscape and Environmental Management Plan to demonstrate how the development will minimise impacts on the setting and meet the objectives of the Landscape Framework, including providing a structure for the development that will contribute to creation of a community green space. Landscape buffers are proposed to create a strong green settlement edge and development adjoining the settlement boundary will be required to provide a landscape buffer. On the basis of the available information, the SoS considers significant effects in this regard are unlikely.

Cumulative Effects
Each proposal should be considered on its own merits as PPG indicates. There are occasions, however, when other existing or approved development may be relevant in determining whether significant effects are likely due to a proposed development. PPG indicates that only existing or approved applications ought to be considered. There is the potential for cumulative effects with existing residential development in North Benfleet and Bowers Gifford, as well as with a consented development for a care home and 125 retirement bungalows approximately 830m south-west.

There is likely to be an increase in traffic and the local highways authority will need to be satisfied that the highways' capacity is not compromised. This can be managed through conditions to the NDO. Any increase in resultant emissions is unlikely to give

rise to significant effects on air quality due to the scale of the developments. There is likely to be increased demand on local infrastructure and services. The proposed new local centre for community infrastructure, including healthcare, school places, open space and employment opportunities will be accessible for the benefit of existing, as well as new residents. To mitigate potential cumulative recreational effects on designated sites, a financial contribution towards implementing the Essex Coast Recreational Disturbance Avoidance & Mitigation Strategy (RAMS) can be secured by condition. Based on the available information, including LUC's views, the SoS considers that significant effects in this regard are unlikely.

Overall Conclusion

Given the SoS's conclusions on the above matters, she considers that the potential impact of the proposal on the environment is unlikely to be significant. In reaching this conclusion she has had regard to the screening request from Bower's Gifford and North Benfleet Parish Council and accompanying documents, including LUC's report, as well as the views of Natural England, Historic England and the Environment Agency. The SoS concludes that an EIA is not necessary on those issues considered specifically above or any other matter.

NAME	Astrid Lawrance
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