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Emma Bowerman
South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils
Planning
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Dear Emma,

Re: Thames Farm Shiplake, Woodland Planting

Firstly, I recognise that the council are disappointed that there has been a delay to the planting of the woodland frontage at Thames Farm, Shiplake, and I would like to reassure you that it is our full intention to deliver the woodland planting at the earliest opportunity.

At the time of removal of the trees (November 2019) along the frontage of Reading Road, it was fully expected that the woodland would be planted by February 2020 as per the original agreement under the Tree Works Application (reference 13S12-3043) and the Woodland Project Plan.

However, as we have discussed and set out further below, whilst undertaking technical investigations to discharge drainage condition 11 on P16/S0970/O, unforeseen ground conditions have meant that additional investigative work and engagement with stakeholders has been necessary to identify measures to make the site safe to replant the trees. To provide clarity to the council, I have set out below our commitment to the works, and with input from our expert advisers, why the planting has been delayed and the next steps to re-plant the woodland.

Work undertaken up to present

As above, at the time of the removal of trees there was full intention of re-planting in line with the Woodland Project Plan, by February 2020. However, additional site investigation works undertaken in late 2019 identified the presence of chalk dissolution features within the ground. Subsequent additional testing, reported in late December 2019, identified significantly disturbed ground predominantly within the eastern part of the site, including the woodland planting area secured under the outline permission and Tree Works Consent.

As we have discussed with the council previously, the presence of these dissolution features raises potential for sinkholes to appear across the site. In order to make the site safe for both residential development and the woodland planting, our expert adviser VertaseFLI has confirmed that ground stabilisation will be required across the site prior to any woodland planting.

In this respect, it is of critical importance that the ground stabilisation works are undertaken prior to the replacement of the trees due for two key reasons:

1. Health and Safety

Based on the findings the investigation, VertaseFLI have confirmed it would not be safe to plant new large, semi mature trees into ground which is known to be affected by dissolution features. There is a risk that the weight/ wind loading of these trees and the machinery used to deliver and install them could result in ground subsidence. In a worst-case scenario resulting in trees becoming uprooted. We appreciate that trees were already present within this area and did not appear to have been affected by ground movements, but these were located along the frontage of the site, and therefore did not extend as far into the site. Otherwise, it is likely that they were either self-seeded or planted as saplings and therefore had sufficient time become adequately anchored/ rooted before becoming fully grown.

2. Ground improvement procedure

The proposed ground improvement includes the drilling of holes into the identified dissolution features allowing grout to be injected under pressure to increase the density of the soils to that similar material unaffected by dissolution features. The spacing of the holes will be between 1.5m and 3.0m, and therefore the presence of obstructions such as trees may prevent an adequate number of holes from being installed, resulting in the ground not being properly treated and risk of future subsidence occurring. The grouting process only improves ground conditions greater than 3m below ground level. Therefore, a different technique will be used for the near-surface soils which involve the use of a vibratory roller to apply pressure from the surface to improve the density of the materials affected by the dissolution features to that similar of natural ground conditions. The presence of trees will also constrict this process, and it is possible that it may also damage the tree root systems. For this reason, it is not possible to undertake these works after trees have been re-planted.

Based on the findings of the report in late December 2019, an initial design of the required ground improvement works was undertaken and reported in March 2020. However, it is necessary to secure approval of the procedure from Thames Water for these works, which we can progress once the drainage condition has been agreed.

In this regard, we have been working closely with South Oxfordshire District Council and Thames Water since January 2020 to explain the ground conditions and secure an appropriate drainage strategy. A condition discharge application P20/S0715/DIS for the drainage strategy was submitted to the council on 21 February 2020, and after ongoing discussions with Thames Water and the Environment Agency, this was withdrawn due to the additional information required by both parties.

Since this time, ongoing discussions with Thames Water have identified an alternative drainage solution which has been submitted to the council in August 2020 under reference P20/S2808/DIS. Determination for this application is due by 18 September, and is expected no later than end of September.

On approval of the drainage strategy, Taylor Wimpey will instruct VertaseFLI to engage with Thames Water to agree the ground stabilisation strategy and commence works, in order that the woodland will be planted at the earliest opportunity.

Process and timetable for securing ground stabilisation and woodland planting

Ground stabilisation programme and timetable

In terms of process for the ground improvement works, this is set out below with the anticipated time taken for each stage. Please note that some tasks will be taken in parallel, therefore, we anticipate the site-wide works to be completed in 34 weeks.

- Lead time – 2 weeks
- Pre-mobilisation preliminaries (i.e. H&S documents, method statements, etc.) – 4 weeks
- Mobilise all equipment to site and set up compound facilities – 2 weeks
- Removal and stockpiling of topsoil – 3 weeks
- Rolling of material surface to remove 'soft spots' – 7 weeks
- Installation of stabilised working platform required for the grouting rigs – 22 weeks
- Compaction grouting of the dissolution features (including verification) – 25 weeks
- Compaction of the near-surface soils using compaction roller – 10 weeks
- Site demobilisation – 12 weeks

However, VertaseFLI have scheduled the works to allow a phased handover of the site, to include the tree planting area in the first phase to enable early delivery of trees following completion of the works in that area. The release of the tree planting area is anticipated to be within week 18 of 34 week site programme.

Tree planting timetable

The works to install the new woodland planting is seasonally constrained due to the limitations on when mature field grown tree stock can be lifted from the ground and transported for replanting. This must occur during the winter months when the trees are dormant. In an average year, tree lifting in the nurseries occurs from around mid-November, after the leaves have sufficiently dropped and must be complete prior to the trees breaking bud and coming back into leaf the following spring i.e. around the start of February. This planting window is dependent on seasonal weather conditions and the planting season can often be slightly shorter or longer depending on the prevailing weather.

Due to the significant size of the trees involved in the woodland planting scheme, especially the super semi-mature trees, the estimated programme of installation for the works will be 5 working weeks from initial deliveries starting, with a further 3 weeks prior to this to allow for mobilisation and the tree lifting to be undertaken, resulting in a requirement for an 8 week planting window. In order to provide sufficient space and manoeuvrability to allow for the installation of the super semi-mature trees, the larger specimens will need to be positioned and installed first, followed by the smaller young saplings.

Given the winter planting season constraints and the Christmas break, the planting works will ideally commence in early November to allow for the works to be complete by late January.

Anticipated programme

Under the assumption that the drainage condition is approved at the end of September 2020, the following timetable is therefore expected:

End of September 2020: Drainage condition approved

End of October 2020: Thames Water approval for ground improvement strategy

November 2020: Commence ground improvement works

March 2021: Release of woodland planting area (18 weeks from November 2020)

As set out above, the tree planting window ends in February when the trees come back into leaf. Due to the health and safety as well as procedural requirements for the ground to be stabilised prior to the

planting of the woodland, and the requisite programme for such works set out above, it is regrettably not possible to deliver the woodland planting by February 2021.

In the event the drainage condition was discharged earlier and grouting commenced ahead of that anticipated above (i.e. October 2020), given the 5 week planting programme required from the initial delivery of the tree stock, there would unfortunately remain insufficient time within the Winter 2020/2021 planting season to safely plant the trees, particularly considering the variable nature of the planting window.

Summary

The importance of the woodland planting in terms of local character and to the local community is recognised and understood, and as above we are working to deliver the planting at the earliest opportunity. We are committed to the delivery of the woodland planting at Thames Farm, together with the delivery of a high quality development that provides both market and affordable homes, allotments and high quality public play and open space.

Based on the above timeframes, however, the ground improvement of the woodland area is anticipated to be completed no earlier March 2021. It is therefore regrettable but unavoidable that the woodland cannot safely be planted by February 2021. It is of great importance to Taylor Wimpey that the clear Health & Safety risk to planting the trees prior to the ground remediation is acknowledged.

Therefore, subject to the drainage condition being discharged as expected and positive engagement with Thames Water progressing in terms of the ground stabilisation process, it is expected that we will be implementing the planting strategy in the Winter 2021/22 planting season.

Yours sincerely,



Technical Director

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