

## LONDON BOROUGH OF MERTON – SITES AND POLICIES DPD

### Site Proposal 48 – 84–88 Bushey Road, Raynes Park, London, SW20 0JH

This representation is submitted on behalf of AXA Real Estate and Next Group plc, who own Section 48a of Site 48 as delineated on the London Borough of Merton Sites and Policies plan.

#### The Site

The site is approximately 0.96 ha and is currently occupied by Safestore and a vacant office and warehouse building. Apex House, a vacant multi storey office building fronts Bushey Road and behind it lays the Safestore building. Apex House House has been vacant and marketed for occupation for approximately 7 years.

The site is located at the western end of a wider employment and retail area. The site is bounded to the north by an industrial building, occupied by Racetec, to the west by the A3 Beverley Way dual carriageway, to the south by Bushey Road and Raynes Park High School beyond, and to the east by an industrial warehouse and retail units beyond which the rest of the employment/retail area.

#### Site and Policies DPD Allocation

The draft DPD allocates the site for the following:-

*An employment led mixed use scheme, research and development (B1[b] Use Class), light industrial appropriate in a residential area (B1[c] Use Class) and storage or distribution (B8 Use Class) that may include an appropriate mix of any of the following: bulky goods retail (A1 Use Class), car show room (sui generis Use Class) and school (D1 Use Class).*

In addition to the above the document states that:-

*“As a ‘Locally Significant Industrial Site’ mixed use proposals must be employment led.”*

And

*“Any retail development proposed on the site will be restricted to providing at least 70% of retail floorspace as ‘bulky goods’ for sale on the premises, in order to avoid undue harm to the viability of Wimbledon town centre and other surrounding centres.”*

It is noted that the Council recognise that:-

*“Marketing of both parts of the site has shown little or no interest in retaining the current office/light industrial use for the vacant areas of the site.”*

### Background and Axa Real Estate Response

As a result of the long term vacancy at Apex House and the lack of current and likely occupier demand in the area for B Use Class development, AXA Real Estate are exploring alternative redevelopment options for the site. Following extensive market testing, the most suitable, viable and deliverable option is to redevelop the site to provide a Next Home & Fashion store.

Accordingly, we welcome the Council’s recognition that the site is suitable for A1 retail. However, we disagree that this should be restricted solely to “bulky goods” and that any redevelopment should have a restriction of 70% of any retail floorspace being for bulky goods.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the site is out of town and there should be controls to ensure that any scheme does not harm the town centre, it is inappropriate and unjustified to impose an arbitrary figure of 70%. Put simply, there is no evidence provided in the DPD for imposing such a restriction.

Instead, any restrictions should only be imposed through conditions following the determination of a detailed planning application where the particular effects of a retailer have been examined in a Retail Impact and Sequential Approach Assessment.

In addition, the policy should recognise that uses such as retail are employment generating. The creation of jobs is not purely restricted to B Use Class operators.

Therefore, AXA Real Estate would like to see the wording of the Council’s “preferred use” and “issues” section to be amended as follows:-

*“An employment led mixed use scheme, research and development (B1[b] Use Class), light industrial appropriate in a residential area (B1[c] Use Class) and storage or distribution (B8 Use Class,) ~~that may include an appropriate mix of any of the following: bulky goods retail~~ **Non Food Retail Warehousing** (A1 Use Class), car show room (sui generis Use Class) and school (D1 Use Class).”*

*““Retail development proposed on the site ~~will~~ **might** be restricted to ~~providing~~ **provide an element of** ~~at least 70%~~ of retail floorspace as ‘bulky goods’ for sale on the premises, in order to avoid undue harm to the viability of Wimbledon town centre and other surrounding centres. **Any restriction will be determined on a case by case basis, depending on the nature of the intended occupier and should also have regard to the overall level of floorspace being developed, not just the retail floorspace**”.*

### Next Format

Next is an established retailer in Greater London and recently invested in nearby Kingston upon Thames by consolidating two existing stores, but taking extra floorspace and increasing the overall offer. The nearest stores to the site are in Colliers Wood, Kingston and Wimbledon. Next also invested in Sutton in 2008 by relocating to a significantly larger unit in the St Nicholas shopping centre.

The Raynes Park location has been chosen by Next to increase its representation in this part of Greater London. The format is based upon a marriage of Next's fashion range and the bulky Home lines, particularly furniture and furnishings

In respect of Home the intention is to use the additional space to provide a significantly enhanced range of 'roomset' displays which show a variety of different rooms, fully furnished using products for the Home ranges, so that customers can see how the furniture, soft furnishings, lighting and so on can be combined. Further details on the Next Home product range, store format, and photographs of typical 'room' displays are provided in the Next Home retailer profile at Appendix 1

The range of products currently sold at existing Next Home stores comprises:

- Beds, cots and bedroom furniture;
- Sofas and armchairs;
- Tables and dining chairs;
- Bathroom fittings and furniture;
- Shelving, sideboards and other home storage;
- Garden furniture, barbecues, planters and plants;
- Lighting;
- Televisions, vacuums, kettles and other electrical goods;
- Wallpaper and paint;
- Rugs;
- Curtains, cushions, bed linen, towels and bath mats;
- Picture frames, mirrors, vases and ornaments; and
- Crockery and cutlery.
- DIY items including drills, hammers, screwdrivers and the like

The range of products proposed to be retailed by the Next 'Home' element of the store will typically conform to conditions on planning permissions that seek to restrict use to the sale of bulky goods, provided that these allow for an ancillary element of non-bulky items to be sold. Bulky goods typically require a significant amount of floorspace for their storage, display and sale, as well as good vehicular access and servicing arrangements, and car parking provision in close proximity to enable products to be easily transported.

The operational requirements of the Home element of the proposed store are reflected in the fact that standalone Next Home stores are typically located in edge or out-of-centre locations and established retail park destinations. The role of edge- and out-of-centre retail warehouses in accommodating bulky goods is recognised in the government's good Practice Guidance on retail planning, which identifies the complementary role of bulky goods retail warehousing to town centre retailing.

As set out above, the store will also trade the full range of Next fashion, clothing and footwear items. In order for a financially viable high quality redevelopment of the site to take place an element of open A1 (non food) consent will be required as fashion will produce a high sales density than bulky home items. Without this any

occupier such as Next will be unable to operate a profitable store at the level of rent required.

### Next – Employment

We welcome and agree with the Council’s assertion that any redevelopment of the site should be “employment led”.

As set out previously, the majority of the site (Apex House) has been vacant for over 7 years, with no interest having been shown by occupiers, despite the site having been marketed for the whole of that period. Advice provided to AXA Real Estate by employment agents reveals that there is little prospect of an occupier being found for the foreseeable future, for either the existing building or a new B class development.

Accordingly, despite being a “Locally Significant Industrial Site”, the site has delivered few jobs for Merton residents.

A Next Home development will create around 220 jobs, plus additional indirect jobs through local suppliers and temporary construction jobs as the scheme is built, providing a very real benefit to the surrounding area; this is a significant increase on the existing use on the site and meets the Council’s aims for delivering new employment generating uses. Furthermore, Next expects nominal impact on its existing stores and nearby town centres when the proposed new store opens.

### Conclusions

We welcome the Council’s recognition that the site is suitable for non-food retail. However, the policy should be amended to recognise that retail is also an employment generating use.

In addition, whilst it is recognised that as a result of the sites out of centre location, it will be appropriate to have some restrictions on the use of floorspace, the current wording of “70% bulky” is inappropriate, unjustified and is not based on sound evidence. Accordingly, policy should be amended to reflect the fact that any restrictions on floorspace or the range of goods traded should only be imposed through conditions following the determination of a detailed planning application where the particular effects of a retailer have been examined in a Retail Impact and Sequential Approach Assessment.

The above amendments will help create a policy framework that will help deliver new investment on the site, creating 220 jobs in a new Next Home and Fashion Store on a vacant site.

Redevelopment will significantly improve the visual amenity on the site, not only replacing the existing Apex House but also opening up views to the locally listed tower on the adjacent site.