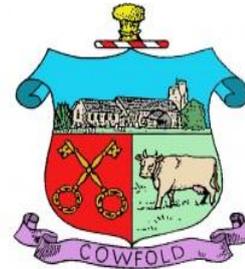




# WEST GRINSTEAD PARISH COUNCIL



West Grinstead Parish Council, The Parish Office Village Hall, High Street, Partridge Green, West Sussex. RH13 8HX

Shipley Parish Council, Dawtreys, Bracken Lane, Storrington, RH20 3HR

Nuthurst Parish Council, 107 Morris Drive, Billingshurst, West Sussex RH14 9ST

Cowfold Parish Council, 117 Acorn Avenue, Cowfold, West Sussex, RH13 8RT

13 April 2021

Dear

## **Proposed development of 3,500 houses at Wealdcross (Buck Barn)**

The four Parish Councils of West Grinstead, Cowfold, Shipley and Nuthurst represent some 8,000 people. We have taken the unusual step of writing to you jointly to ensure that officers of HDC and elected members are left in absolutely no doubt about our communities' huge opposition to Wealdcross becoming part of the District's Local Plan.

## **Circumstances have changed dramatically**

Indeed, we question whether this emerging version of a Local Plan is even needed? So much has changed since this version was first conceived. As a result of these changes, we suggest that the likely demand for mid and low-priced housing in the District will decline significantly.

One of the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic has been to send unemployment soaring and consequently to reduce people's desire to move and their ability to afford mortgages. Much of this is due to the collapse in air travel in and out of

Gatwick airport, something that is not predicted to recover for a number of years.

Brexit has created trading difficulties for many local businesses. Uncertainty has caused some businesses to collapse and shed staff, or alternatively reduce working hours, again reducing people's ability to obtain mortgages. All the consequences of Brexit are predicted to take many years to resolve.

Changes in people's work and shopping habits will also have a profound effect on the need for new housing in the District. Some degree of home-working is likely to persist thus releasing office blocks to become dwelling spaces. Town centres are facing acute problems as people have turned to on-line shopping. Empty shops may also become dwellings. These conversions of offices and shops is something that is being actively encouraged by new government planning initiatives.

In addition to all these changes, and as a result of economic uncertainty, there is now net emigration from Britain. As EU nationals leave, more housing stock becomes available thus reducing the need for new-build housing.

**In our view, HDC now needs to commission a study of the likely future need for new housing in the District before proceeding any further with a Local Plan.**

### **New, Additional Proposals to be included in the Local Plan**

It is understood from Thakeham Homes' own publicity leaflets that a new, major northern access route into Wealdcross is proposed from the A24, across open countryside to Bar Lane in Copsale. It is also understood that this new junction will be some 800 metres south of the southern Southwater roundabout and that the layout will encompass a fifty-acre industrial complex. It would thus seem that under the new proposals, there would be far more urbanisation than in the Regulation 18 proposals and that far more unique countryside in the Low Weald would be lost.

That this new and important information has not been put into the public domain by HDC is a matter of considerable concern to our four Parish Councils. Under the Regulation 18 Consultation, residents, Parish Councils and District Councillors were consulted on a significantly different proposal. This Regulation 18 proposal was not only for a smaller development site subsuming

less countryside, but one without a new junction just south of the southern Southwater roundabout and one without a fifty-acre industrial complex.

**Now, District Councillors are making decisions about a very different scheme to that described in the Regulation 18 document. This is seen as a very flawed process and yet another reason for HDC not to proceed with current attempts to deliver a Local Plan.**

The four Parish Councils now wish to state here their crucial and serious objections to the new Thakeham proposal as it is currently understood.

Firstly, this proposed road system will destroy yet more of the Low Weald countryside. In addition to the acreage of countryside due to be lost to housing, the total amount will amount to nothing short of desecration of the countryside in our District.

Secondly, a new road system will inevitably set a precedent for even more housing in the locality. Development will not stop at 3,500 new homes.

Thirdly, this ribbon development will have the effect of extending Southwater southwards to create a very large urban sprawl alongside the A24. It will destroy both countryside habitats and the individual character of the villages and hamlets affected.

Fourthly, that building a fifty-acre industrial estate in open countryside rather than on a brownfield site is totally unacceptable. The increase in heavy vehicle traffic is also a big issue and likely to result in more serious accidents, without to our knowledge, any increased provision in the ambulance and hospital services.

Fifthly, it is also unacceptable that such a major, urban development with an industrial complex is not being considered and assessed as a “stand alone” issue but rather, sandwiched amongst a myriad of other planning considerations at other proposed sites at Ifield, Adversane, Southwater, Henfield, Billingshurst, Horsham and Copsale, each with their own special issues and problems.

### **Road safety and pollution**

Many of our concerns about the emerging Local Plan centre on the impact of Wealdcross on the already over-burdened road system in the Low Weald. Adding potentially another 7 to 8 thousand cars plus heavy lorries and delivery vehicles to local roads seems senseless. Commuter rates within the District are

already very high and there is no doubt that the vast majority of people who are able to purchase/rent a “Wealdcross” house would need to travel to either the Gatwick Diamond, or London to work. There is no nearby rail station, poor public transport and therefore, heavy car usage is inevitable causing higher levels of pollution to damage people’s health. HDC should be seen to improve pollution levels and not make them worse.

Cowfold is in an unfortunate position being en-route between Wealdcross and the M23. It would be badly affected by the high volume of traffic passing through the village and the ensuing high pollution levels. Those seeking to travel to the Gatwick Diamond or Brighton, to the universities for example, will inevitably want to use the M23. Yet, Cowfold is already badly affected by the high pollution levels that result from traffic queues at its roundabouts. The future respiratory health of the 120 children in St Peter’s School near to the A272 is of concern, as well as the polluting effect on the fabric of its ancient church and the environment nearby.

No mitigating measures suggested by Thakeham Homes will even begin to address the problems of the already inadequate road system in the Low Weald. And, please note that Thakeham Homes have no powers to institute bus services, increase train services or enlarge station car parks in order to reduce car movements.

Following Thakeham’s new proposal for a major northern access route into the Wealdcross housing development and Industrial complex, it is unclear what Thakeham is now proposing for the junction of the A24 and A272 at Buck Barn. The Regulation 18 proposals that were consulted upon contained a flyover/underpass to achieve free-flowing traffic. This was heavily criticised as simply transferring traffic congestion elsewhere, to the Cowfold and Washington roundabouts, as well as making it dangerous for traffic wanting to access the A24 from side roads. Does this proposal still stand, or has it been replaced by another scheme that has not been put into the public domain? This lack of transparency is both unacceptable to the general public and leading District Councillors to make decisions without knowing all the facts.

If any road improvements are needed in County, then an extensive and co-ordinated programme of works across the whole of the Low Weald needs to be instituted. Addressing just the Buck Barn crossroads and creating another new junction in the short distance between Buck Barn and the southern Southwater junction is both inadequate and nonsensical.

## **Ecology and Knepp Castle**

The Knepp Castle re-wilding initiative to make the estate profitable is nationally and internationally re-known. Already, during Covid, Knepp Castle has seen a big upturn in the numbers of people using the 28 miles of footpaths over the estate. This has had a big effect on its ecological initiative and Knepp Castle is deeply concerned at the thought of another ten thousand people on its doorstep.

HDC have adopted a very worthwhile ecological initiative called “Wilder Horsham” which favours the creation of wildlife corridors, perhaps involving eco-bridges. Knepp Castle is working at national level to help create a wildlife corridor from Climping in the south, through St Leonards Forest, northwards to Ashdown Forest. We would like HDC to place great value on its own initiative and support Knepp Castle and its adjacent Parishes rather than raise a huge impediment in the form of this massive development at Wealdcross.

If such an ecological corridor could be established, then HDC might use it to achieve a national designation. This is an important issue since currently, no area in the District has any major special designation, such as National Park status.

Without support from District Councillors, Knepp Castle stands to suffer. Inevitably, there will be widespread criticism if HDC fail to protect such an important ecological venture. Knepp Castle has proven that re-wilding can be economically viable whilst at the same time improving the well-being of the environment and local people.

Furthermore, this Wealdcross development of housing, more roads and industrial complex would destroy views to the South Downs, destroy the quiet and peacefulness that people need in their lives and destroy woodland, plants and wildlife. In view of this scale of destruction, Thakeham Homes’ repeated assertions that fifteen years of construction at Wealdcross, plus the building of a fifty-acre industrial site and a new road system will result in an improved twenty percent bio-diversity gain is seen as ridiculous.

## **Concluding remarks**

The Parish Councils trust that they have conveyed local peoples’ feelings strongly to officers and elected members. They are not expecting to see what is in effect a “new town” built across open countryside, isolated from any other

settlement, and with exceedingly poor transport links to the places where new residents might find work. Furthermore, they do not want a fifty-acre industrial site built on land currently used for farming. Nor do they want to see the highly innovative scheme at Knepp Castle wrecked and they most certainly do not want to see this very unsustainable site at Wealdcross included in HDC's Strategic Plan.

The four Parish Councils finally conclude with this remark: the Wealdcross/Buck Barn site was assessed in the SHELAA two years ago as "Not currently developable". This was because it could not be demonstrated that the site could "be sustainably developed and ... not cause significant harm". The Parish Councils consider that nothing has happened in the past two years to change that assessment. Indeed, changes caused by Covid and Brexit have strengthened the forcefulness of that original decision. Therefore, we four Parish Councils urge District Councillors to eliminate this very unwise site from HDC's Local Plan.

Yours sincerely

West Grinstead, Cowfold, Shipley and Nuthurst Parish Councils

Sent to:

Andrew Griffiths, MP

Jeremy Quinn, MP

Glen Chipp, Chief Executive, HDC

Barbara Childs, Director of Place, HDC

Catherine Howe, Head of Strategic Planning, HDC

All HDC District Councillors

The Owners of Knepp Castle

Sussex Wildlife Trust