

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
PLANNING COMMITTEE
HELD ON 9 AUGUST 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.23 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: David Cornish (Chair), Andrew Mickleburgh (Vice-Chair), Alistair Neal, Wayne Smith, Michael Firmager, Stuart Munro, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Tony Skuse and Bill Soane

Councillors Present and Speaking

Councillors: Stephen Newton

Officers Present

Gordon Adam, Principal Highway Development Control Officer
Connor Corrigan, Head of Strategic Development
Lyndsay Jennings, Senior Solicitor
Callum Wernham, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist

Case Officers Present

Mark Croucher
Stefan Fludger
James Fuller

16. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

17. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 12 July 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

18. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Michael Firmager declared a prejudicial interest in agenda item 20, application number 223458, on the basis that he had formed a view on the application. Michael added that he would move to the public seating area to allow him to address the Committee as a registered speaker in the capacity of a Ward Member. Michael stated that he would leave the room after addressing the Committee, and would take no part in the debate or vote.

Bill Soane declared a prejudicial interest in agenda item 20, application number 223458, on the grounds that he had close friendships with members of the golf club, including business associates. Bill stated that he would leave the room for the duration of this item and would take no part in the debate or vote.

With regards to agenda item 21, application number 231453, Alistair Neal noted that he was a Member of Earley Town Council's Planning Committee. Whilst the Committee had considered this application, Alistair stated that he was not present at this meeting and would view this application with an open mind by listening to all representations before forming a view.

With regards to agenda item 21, application number 231453, Andrew Mickleburgh noted that he was the Chair of the Council's Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee and was also a Member of the Corporate Parenting Board. Andrew added that

he had not formed any view on this application, and would consider this application with an open mind by listening to all representations before forming a view.

19. APPLICATIONS TO BE DEFERRED AND WITHDRAWN ITEMS

No applications were recommended for deferral, or withdrawn.

20. APPLICATION NO.223458 - LAND AT SONNING GOLF CLUB, DUFFIELD ROAD, SONNING, RG4 6GJ

Bill Sonae declared a prejudicial interest in this item and left the room for its duration.

Michael Firmager declared a prejudicial interest in this item and moved to the public seating area to facilitate him addressing the Committee as a registered speaker in his capacity as Ward Member.

Proposal: Outline planning permission for the proposed erection of up to 50 no. dwellings with public open space and revised access off Duffield Road, plus associated modifications to Sonning Golf Club including reconfiguration of golf club car parking areas and relocation of the 18th green, addition of a practice putting green, new driving nets, new short game chipping area and conversion of the west wing of the existing clubhouse to accommodate a new golf simulator practice facility, including removal of external staircase and changes to fenestration. (All matters reserved except for access).

Applicant: Sonning Golf Club Ltd, Duffield Road, Sonning RG4 6GJ

The Committee considered a report about this application, set out in agenda pages 15 to 70.

The Committee were advised that updates contained within the Supplementary Planning Agenda included:

- Further clarification with regards to location sustainability;
- Further clarification with regards to there being no loss of public amenity space and that the development would not compromise the future viability and useability of the golf course;
- Reemphasis that the application site sat within flood zone 1 where the risk of flooding was low;
- Additional condition 26 with regards to submission of a detailed drainage strategy;
- Confirmation that the development would provide 40% affordable housing on site;
- Clarification that the application site is larger than that proposed within the local Plan Update, and that the 24 dwellings proposed within the Local Plan Update were in addition to the 13 units that had planning permission to the south-west.

Mark Croucher, case officer, advised the Committee of an additional recommended condition with regards to submission of details in relation to mitigation measures to prevent golf ball strikes on the proposed properties.

David Cornish noted that the Committee had undertaken a site visit, with all Members present with the exception of Bill Soane who had given apologies due to his prejudicial interest, whilst Michael Firmager attended the visit in his capacity as a Ward Member.

Trefor Fisher, Sonning Parish Council, spoke in objection to the application. Trefor thanked the previous case officer, Senjuti Manna, for meeting with the Parish Council on several occasions to discuss the details of this application. Trefor noted the quality and quantity of the objections submitted, and was of the opinion that the objections were of the highest quality. Trefor added that the Right Honourable Theresa May MP had submitted a detailed objection both as a resident and a Member of Parliament. Trefor stated that the application site shared the boundary with a site which had extant permission for 57 flats. Combined, sites in the vicinity with extant permission and this proposal would result in a 16 percent increase to the number of dwellings within Sonning. Trefor stated that the application contravened numerous policies, some of which were used to argue against the site within the draft Local Plan Update. Trefor added that the Sonning community accepted that it was required to take a fair share of new housing to help the Council achieve a five-year housing land supply, however Trefor was of the opinion that Sonning had taken its fair share of new housing and applications such as this were unsustainable. Trefor noted the change in Government policy which would prioritise development within towns and urban areas, where jobs and facilities were located, and away from countryside locations such as the development site which was unsustainable. Trefor stated that the reality of this site would mean that residents would not walk to the Brecon Road Parade shops and would instead have to drive into Woodley or Twyford. Trefor felt that this site shared similarities with the recently dismissed appeal for a site in Hurst, with unreliable bus services and high grade countryside. Trefor asked that the application be refused, as approval would result in the loss of high quality sport and leisure facilities whilst delivering an unsustainable development.

Carol Jewell, Woodley Town Council, spoke in objection to the application. Carol stated that new developments should encourage the reduction of car journeys, and cited the Inspector's comments in relation to the nearby site for 13 dwellings whereby it was stated that access to Woodley Town Centre by foot would not be attractive and as such the location would not be attractive for non-car owners. Carol added that whilst the site might meet accessibility criteria on distance, the safety of the walking routes had not been assessed. Carol stated that bus services would fall short on regularity, with services running on an hourly basis from stops between 150m and 650m away. Carol was of the opinion that the application would increase pollution, result in a loss of greenspace and reduce biodiversity in the area. Carol stated that the proposals would increase traffic on the already busy Duffield Road and would result in loss of habitats for a variety of animals. Carol urged the Committee to refuse the application.

Gordon Jones, resident, spoke in objection to the application. Gordon stated that the site was located within designated countryside and had been identified as such for hundreds of years. Gordon added that the course and its surrounding provided an important habitat for a variety of wildlife including deer, bats and a variety of birds and mammals. Gordon stated that the site was located outside of the Sonning development area, whilst additional traffic would cause a significant problem for the local community. Gordon added that shops, doctors and pharmacies were all located over a mile away, and therefore it was very unlikely that potential residents would walk to these facilities. Gordon was of the opinion that existing residents would see no benefits as a result of the proposed development, whilst the developer and golf course owner would profit from the proposals. Gordon stated that the development would lead to increased noise and light pollution for local residents.

Gordon added that the Council's focus should be the wellbeing of the existing population, and was of the opinion that this application was totally inappropriate and should be refused.

John Allen, resident, spoke in objection to the application. John stated that the application site was an integral part of the golf course, which was neither surplus to requirements or underutilised. John added that leisure and sporting facilities should not be built over, and noted that the proposed properties would be at risk of being struck by stray golf balls, which already occurred on the Charvil side of the course. John added that a net would need to be over 100 feet tall to prevent such incidents. John was of the opinion that the proposed virtual golfing area was no substitute for a practice area and driving range, and felt that this application was part of a gradual creep into the removal of leisure facilities in the wider area including the rugby club, Blue Mountain Golf Course and the Golf Course in Hurst. John stated that developing over sports and leisure facilities was against Government guidelines, and asked that the Committee refuse the application on the basis of unacceptable loss of amenity provision.

Mike Burlow, resident, spoke in objection to the application. Mike stated that the Council's vision included facilitating residents to live happy and healthy lives, which would be at odds with the removal of sporting facilities at this location. Mike stated that the NPPF was clear that development should not result in the loss of public amenity space. Mike disagreed with the sentiment within the agenda that the application would not result in the loss of public amenity space. Mike stated that the driving range was heavily used, with 24 golfers using the range for practice on one day last week. Sonning had 10 teams registered in the area who utilised these facilities, whilst professional tournaments also made intensive use of the driving range facilities. Mike added that golfing lessons were offered to local school children, whilst club members could bring their children to the driving range to learn the sport. Mike noted that Golf England's research had shown that driving ranges were a gateway for children to get involved in the sport. Mike added that there was no alternative capacity to cope with the demand, whilst provision of a virtual range was not the answer.

Tom Rumble, agent, spoke in support of the application. Tom stated that the current practice area represented only a small part of the club, whilst the remainder of the club would be unaffected by the proposals. Tom added that the application had real merits, with other applications and appeal decisions confirming that this site was situated within a sustainable area. Tom stated that the driving range was not high grade countryside, whilst the site was well contained and the application would retain mature trees in order to avoid impacts on existing properties. Tom added that this application included improved facilities for the wider site, unlike the proposal within the draft Local Plan Update. After consideration of officer and consultee responses, modifications had been made to the scheme to reduce the development area, sensitively locate dwellings to facilitate the retention of mature trees and to include the delivery of public open spaces. Tom stated that the separation gap between Sonning and Charvil would be maintained, whilst the density of the site was similar to that of the adjacent site which had permission for 13 dwellings. Tom confirmed that forty-percent affordable housing would be delivered on-site, whilst a detailed technical travel survey had demonstrated that the road network had capacity and that the proposed access would be safe. Tom was of the opinion that the proposal represented a high quality and sensitive scheme, whilst technical assessments had shown that the proposals could be accommodated satisfactorily. Tom noted that the site had been nominated as a local green space, however these nominations were only to be considered as part of the policy setting process and as such no weight should be given

to this when assessing this specific planning application. Tom stated that this site would add to the Council's housing land supply, and commented that there were no negatives that significantly and demonstrably outweighed the benefits of the application as was required via the tilted balance.

Michael Firmager, Ward Member, spoke in objection to the application. Michael stated that he had major concerns regarding the sustainability of the site, with shops being located far away and infrequent bus services operating in the area. Michael added that whilst it was 950m to the nearest Primary School, this involved crossing a dangerous road. Michael commented that Pound Lane suffered from flooding due to poor drainage, which could be worsened via the proposals. Michael was of the opinion that the area was the subject of overdevelopment, with previous local permissions including 13 dwellings and 57 flats, which when added to this proposal would erode the separation gap between Sonning and Charvil. Michael added that the proposal would increase traffic, whilst the loss of 12 car parking spaces for the club would result in club users parking in nearby residential roads, adding to congestion. Michael was concerned regarding how tight the access to the site would be. Michael stated that the golf course was an important biodiversity haven which needed protecting. Michael was of the opinion that loss of leisure facilities should be considered as part of the tilted balance, and the lack of such an assessment could be grounds for legal challenge. Michael questioned where the evidence was in relation to the Supplementary Planning Agenda's suggestion that there would be no loss of public amenity space. Michael feared for the long term viability of the golf club as a result of this application, and urged the Committee to refuse the application.

Michael Firmager left the room.

Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey noted that Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) could not implore shops to open near such sites. Rachelle queried whether the roads would be adopted by WBC, and sought clarity as to how late the golf course stayed open until. Mark Croucher confirmed that WBC could not require shops to open, however the Brecon Road shops were within a medium walking distance as per the living streets guide. For a development of this size, there was not a general expectation that shops would be included as part of the development process. The issue of adoption of roads would be dealt with by a legal agreement, and would be dealt with at the reserved matters stage. Mark added that whilst he was unsure of the exact opening times of the club, the club house was situated away from the proposed development and was located closer to the 13 dwellings that had been given planning permission. Gordon Adam, Principal Highway Development Control Officer, confirmed that the developer was required to build the roads to an adoptable standard, and should they wish to retain the roads privately then fees were applicable to allow the designs and finish product to be inspected by officers.

Alistair Neal queried how the pedestrian linkages would be secured in the absence of a condition, and questioned how the green space could be described as public open space if there was no footpath linkage. Mark Croucher stated that the drawings were indicative at this stage, and to condition a pedestrian linkage may not meet the planning tests at this stage. Mark confirmed that even if the access road was a private road, it would still retain access for all who wished to use the road as it would be private only for maintenance purposes. Mark added that whilst pedestrians may not be able to pass the site and access it via a linkage, they could still access the space via the proposed main access should they wish.

Andrew Mickleburgh sought clarity as to whether the previous permissions for adjacent sites were material considerations, queried the weight that should be given to the loss of a significant leisure facility in the vein of the recent Hurst appeal decision which cited a loss of high grade agricultural land, and sought elaboration as to the comment that permitting development on a site beyond the existing settlement boundary was not considered to undermine the Council's strategic objectives in relation to planned growth in the area. Mark Croucher confirmed that permissions for adjacent sites did form a material consideration, however Members also needed to determine each application on its own merits. Mark confirmed that the situation at the Hurst appeal was different as that related to the loss of high grade agricultural land. Mark stated that the officer opinion was that the barrier between Woodley and Sonning was the railway line and wooded area, which would both be retained. Mark confirmed that in the absence of a five year housing land supply the tilted balance had been engaged, which meant that the application had to be determined in line with the NPPF rather than our outdated development plan.

Wayne Smith queried the current status of the local green space nomination. Mark Croucher confirmed that this area was not designated as a local green space, and was classified as a privately owned recreational space.

Wayne Smith commented that his understanding was that private land could be designated as local green space. Wayne cited a number of issues with the proposed development, including its location in the countryside and outside of development limits, sustainability issues including the basic need for residents to travel to Woodley by vehicle for weekly shops, and the proposals being contrary to CP11. Wayne cited the South Wokingham Strategic Development Location, which could not be accounted within WBC's five year housing land supply as we could not prove that the development was deliverable. Wayne queried whether the Committee wished to grant permission for this site on the chance that it could be added to our five year housing land supply. Wayne was of the opinion that this application would change the whole dynamic of Sonning, whilst providing no additional facilities to increase sustainability such as shopping facilities or bus services. Mark Croucher stated that this application fulfilled the medium walking distance requirement to local facilities, whilst the 13 houses approved in 2018 were approved in line with the current development plan at appeal. With regards to deliverability, Mark confirmed that whilst this was a continuing frustration, the Committee would need to be very clear as to why this site would not be deliverable, and Inspectors were historically reluctant to share this view. Connor Corrigan, Head of Strategic Development, stated that whilst there was significant frustration with regards to the five year housing supply and deliverability, schemes could not be discounted on the chance that they may not come forwards.

David Cornish commented that whilst there would be harm to the course and facilities, this was not a material planning consideration. In addition, the fundamental course would be retained. David stated that he was always concerned when CP11 was breached, however in his opinion the gap between Sonning and Woodley had all but disappeared in any meaningful sense. David raised concern over the increase in the classification of a reasonable walking distance to facilities from 800m to 1.2km, which had been accepted by an Inspector which left the Committee in a difficult situation. David felt that the Committee had to balance the reluctance to reduce the settlement gap against the potential costs and reputational damage should this application be taken to appeal. Mark Croucher stated that no site ticked all the boxes in terms of sustainability, however this site did meet the medium and high thresholds in terms of walking distance to facilities, of which the calculations were based on the chartered institute of highways surveyors. Connor Corrigan

stated that there were a number of services which were in a reasonable walking distance to the application site.

Alistair Neal raised concern that whilst on there were facilities within the living streets guide medium walking distance, the walking route was dangerous requiring pedestrians to walk over the railway bridge and navigate through areas with no pavements in order to reach bus stops. Mark Croucher stated that there were bus stops accessible on Pound Lane.

Tony Skuse was of the opinion that the approval for the adjacent 13 dwellings set a precedent and made it very difficult for the Committee to refuse this application, as it was likely that a refusal would be overturned at appeal. Mark Croucher commented that whilst the performance of this application at appeal was not a material consideration, it was a good 'stress test' to refer to when coming to a conclusion.

Andrew Mickleburgh stated his considerable sympathy with objectors concerns, however highways officers had not objected to the proposals subject to conditions, and whilst the application did not conform with CP11 the application of the tilted balance required the harms of the application to demonstrably outweigh the benefits. With regards to sustainability, Andrew commented that an Inspector had concluded that the adjacent site for 13 dwellings was sustainable, which set a precedent for this application. Andrew stated that he was minded to support a motion to approve the application, subject to additional conditions relating to ball strikes, pedestrian access from Bath Road, generic drainage conditions and a condition requiring ten percent biodiversity net gain.

Stuart Munro was of the opinion that as the application for 13 houses was approved four to five years ago, any precedent set was essentially irrelevant as policy and development had moved on considerably in that time.

David Cornish stated that any motion to refuse the application would require sufficient planning reasons, and whilst the most significant reason put forward thus far seemed to rely on the lack of sustainability, the approval of 13 dwellings at the adjacent site significantly compromised this reason.

With regards to the additional conditions as mentioned by Andrew Mickleburgh, Lyndsay Jennings, Senior Solicitor, confirmed that public rights of way access to the public open space could be secured via the heads of terms of the S106 legal agreement. Connor Corrigan confirmed that the condition 22 set out the plan for biodiversity net gain, which was deemed as sufficient. Andrew Mickleburgh thanked officers for their advice, which he accepted.

Andrew Mickleburgh proposed that the application be approved in line with the officer recommendation, additional condition 26 requiring submission of a detailed drainage strategy as set out in the Supplementary Planning Agenda, and additional condition with regards to the mitigation of ball strikes and amendment to the heads of terms of the S106 legal agreement to secure public rights of way access to the public open space as resolved by the Committee. This was seconded by Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey.

RESOLVED That application number 223458 be approved subject to conditions and informatives as set out in agenda pages 47 to 58, additional condition 26 requiring submission of a detailed drainage strategy as set out in the Supplementary Planning Agenda, and additional condition with regards to the mitigation of ball strikes and

amendment to the heads of terms of the S106 legal agreement to secure public rights of way access to the public open space as resolved by the Committee.

21. APPLICATION NO.231453 - 29 STANTON CLOSE, EARLEY, WOKINGHAM
Michael Firmager and Bill Soane re-entered the room.

Proposal: Full application for change of use from a residential dwelling house to children's home.

Applicant: Wokingham Borough Council

The Committee considered a report about this application, set out in agenda pages 71 to 86.

The Committee were advised that updates contained within the Supplementary Planning Agenda included:

- Removal of condition 4;
- Minor amendment of the wording of conditions 1 to 3.

Nathan Whitley, on behalf of the applicant, spoke in support of the application. Nathan stated that the proposal would facilitate one member of staff and a maximum of two children to live in the property. The home would only accommodate one child, who was already in situ, unless there was an emergency which required a second child to be accommodated for a short period of time. Nathan added that at present, some children in the Borough were placed many miles away from their family, which had huge impacts on their wellbeing whilst also having a significant financial cost associated. Children often felt isolation and abandonment when placed far away from their families, and provision of this facility would allow a child, or a maximum of two, to be placed and cared for locally. Nathan added that it was difficult to support the health and wellbeing needs of children who were placed out of Borough. Nathan stated that this application was supported by CP2, whilst the property would be supported by an assistant manager solely for this property and a general manager who would oversee three total properties. Nathan confirmed that the home would be staffed twenty-four hours per day, whilst OFSTED would confirm the occupancy levels. Nathan concluded by confirming that the property was already accommodating the child in situ, and the application would not change current staffing levels.

Stephen Newton, Ward Member, spoke in objection to the application. Stephen stated that he was a foster carer, and therefore had first hand experience in supporting vulnerable children. Stephen added that whilst he supported the premise of this application there were clear differences between the planning application and the assurances he had been given by Children's Services Officers. Whilst these conversations had given assurances of one child being accommodated at the property, the documentation within the agenda pack allowed for up to two children and the Supplementary Planning Agenda removed any reference to occupancy numbers. Stephen stated that nearly all looked after children were impacted by trauma, and may at times be noisy. With regards to parking, Stephen raised concern that the on-street parking situation was already very busy, and the accommodation of two children could worsen this via additional visitors. In the event of approval of this application, Stephen asked that should two children be accommodated on a long-term basis then conditions be applied to provide three car parking spaces and

installation of soundproofing or sufficient community engagement to mitigate noise concerns.

Bill Soane queried reference to vulnerable adults in condition 4, and commented that it may be possible for side by side parking could be provided in place of tandem parking. James Fuller, case officer, confirmed that condition 4 and therefore the reference to vulnerable adults had been removed in the Supplementary Planning Agenda.

Michael Firmager sought additional detail regarding parking provision, and queried whether the site would be staffed round the clock. James Fuller confirmed that highways officers had assessed the application and had not requested that an additional space be provided. Connor Corrigan, Head of Strategic Development, stated that there was potential to accommodate three cars parking side by side. James Fuller confirmed that the site would be staffed round the clock.

David Cornish voiced his frustration that the Ward Member had been told one version of occupancy levels, whilst the agenda and subsequent Supplementary Planning Agenda had amended those assurances two-fold. David asked that such numbers be confirmed in advance of agenda publication in future.

Andrew Mickleburgh queried whether the property could accommodate individuals up to the age of 18 or also care leavers. Nathan Whitley confirmed that the property would only be occupied to children aged 17 and below unless further permission was arranged to arrange their transition.

Andrew Mickleburgh proposed that additional conditions be added, requiring the applicant to submit details outlining how three cars could be accommodated on-site, requiring the applicant to monitor noise levels and review mitigation measures to limit impact on neighbours, and requiring the applicant to ensure ongoing engagement with the local community to ensure the success of the home.

After some discussion and advice from officers, Andrew Mickleburgh was content to propose the first suggestion as a condition and the following two as informatives.

Andrew Mickleburgh proposed that the application be approved in line with the officer recommendation, Supplementary Planning Agenda, additional condition requiring the applicant to submit details outlining how three cars could be accommodated on-site as resolved by the Committee, and additional informatives asking the applicant to monitor noise levels and review mitigation measures to limit impact on neighbours and recommending the applicant ensure ongoing engagement with the local community to ensure the success of the home as resolved by the Committee. This was seconded by Anthony Skuse.

RESOLVED That application 231453 be approved, subject to conditions and informatives as set out in agenda pages 79 to 80, removal of condition 4 and minor amendment to the wording of conditions 1 to 3 as set out in the Supplementary Planning Agenda, additional condition requiring the applicant to submit details outlining how three cars could be accommodated on-site as resolved by the Committee, and additional informatives asking the applicant to monitor noise levels and review mitigation measures to limit impact on neighbours and recommending the applicant ensure ongoing engagement with the local community to ensure the success of the home as resolved by the Committee.

22. APPLICATION NO.213610 - HATCHGATE AND KENTONS, KENTONS LANE, REMENHAM

Proposal: Full application for the erection of a 2 storey Estate management buildings including gardeners accommodation and underground tunnel linking the estate buildings and ancillary to the main house on Strowdes estate, following demolition of 3No dwellings, 1No pool house, garages and outhouses, stables and hay barn.

Applicant: C/O Avison, Young, Bristol

The Committee considered a report about this application, set out in agenda pages 87 to 124.

The Committee were advised that there were no updates contained within the Supplementary Planning Agenda.

Andrew Mickleburgh commented that this was a large and important site within the countryside and greenbelt. Andrew Mickleburgh commented that he would have expected more detail for a full application such as an integrated estate management plan. However, Andrew accepted that this application had very special circumstances that outweighed any material harm that may be caused by the development.

Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey proposed that the application be approved in line with the officer recommendation. This was seconded by Andrew Mickleburgh.

RESOLVED That application number 213610 be approved, subject to conditions as set out in agenda pages 103 to 107.