

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
PLANNING COMMITTEE  
HELD ON 11 SEPTEMBER 2024 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.25 PM**

**Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Carol Jewell (Chair), Martijn Andrea (Vice-Chair), Wayne Smith, Stuart Munro, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Sam Akhtar, Greg Bello, Moses Iyengunmwena and Andy Ng Siu-hong

**Councillors Present and Speaking**

Councillors: Joseph Barley and Adrian Mather

**Officers Present**

Gordon Adam, Highways Development Control  
Brian Conlon, Operational Lead, Development Management  
Lyndsay Jennings, Senior Lawyer  
Liam Oliff, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist  
Duncan Fisher, Ecology Specialist

**Case Officers Present**

Andrew Chugg

**18. APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies for absence.

**19. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 14 August 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**20. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**21. APPLICATIONS TO BE DEFERRED AND WITHDRAWN ITEMS**

There were no applications to be deferred or withdrawn.

**22. APPLICATION NO 222306 LAND ADJACENT TO BLAGROVE LANE, WOKINGHAM**

**Proposal:** Outline application, with all matters reserved except for access, for the proposed erection of up to 350 dwellings (Use Class C3) and care home (Use Class C2), with new accesses onto Barkham Road and Blagrove Lane, landscaping and onsite SANG, following demolition of outbuildings and agricultural buildings.

**Applicant:** Berkeley Strategic Land Limited

The Committee considered a report on this application, set out in agenda pages 13 to 144.

The Committee were advised that updates contained within the supplementary agenda included:

- Local Plan Update
- Badgers
- Change to wording of Conditions 1,2,3,5,18 & 38

- Change to obligation 2 of the S106 relating to timescales.
- Northern and Southern site access appended to the supplementary agenda
- Late representations

Warren Dixon, Wokingham Town Council, spoke in objection to the application. He felt that the application failed to meet the Borough's standards and that the report was largely based on mitigating the harm. He mentioned that the site was not in the Local Plan Update and that Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) had an active local plan that this site was not in, so it should not have been considered for approval and the reference to a court judgement in West Oxfordshire was not relevant because they didn't have an active Local Plan. He told the committee that the application was in contrary to policy CP11 as it was in countryside and outside the settlement boundary. He added that application 241556 was on the same green space and was rejected. The application was in contrary to CP1 and CP3 and included a loss of 26 hectares of agricultural land. He explained that the new proposed access on Barkham Road led to a new paved area and a loss of mature woodland. He called the new junction on Evendons Lane substandard and mentioned that it would lead to less sustainable travel. He added that it would produce more traffic and was in contrary to policy CP13.

Paul Tolan, resident, spoke in objection to the application. He mentioned that there had been over 1000 objections to the application and that there were last minute amendments that weren't disclosed to the public. He felt that the mitigations mentioned in the report were not enough to outweigh the harms. WBC had declared an ecological emergency and were looking for a 20% uplift in biodiversity, this application had just a 0.14% increase in biodiversity. He explained that the application was dependent on the number 3 bus being diverted through the site but that Reading buses refused to confirm that this would be the case. He added that the site went through a Badger habitat and that officers saying this shouldn't be rejected as they wanted to save legal fees was not a sufficient reason to approve the application. The junction on Evendons Lane was near Evendons School and was unsafe.

Elkie Russell, Managing Director, Berkeley Homes, spoke in support of the application. She told the committee that the 350 proposed homes were needed, quality, family homes. She explained that they would add 18 hectares of public open space and a 9 hectare SANG. Berkeley Homes were working with WBC's ecology team to build underground tunnels for the badgers. The scheme would include 35% affordable housing as well as a 68-bed care home, or if the care home option was not taken up, then there would be 40% affordable housing. 70% of these affordable homes would be social rented housing including 8 cluster flats for assisted living. The homes would be thermally efficient using low carbon and renewable technologies including air source heat pumps. She added that there would be a £16m infrastructure investment into the local area and highways improvements.

Adrian Mather, Ward Councillor, spoke in objection to the application. He mentioned that the Local Plan Update (LPU) was not in its early stages and was available to see and didn't include this site. The LPU would show a 5 Year Housing Land Supply (5YHLS) and therefore the titled balance did not apply. The roads surrounding the site were predominantly country lanes with limited width and compromised two-way traffic. Access through the Viking field and Leslie Sears field were owned by the Town Council, and they had not been consulted on using these accesses. There were many mitigations in the report which were long term deliverables which relied on the finances and goodwill of developers. He added that the site was too small to deliver infrastructure.

Joseph Barley, Ward Councillor, spoke in objection to the application. He felt this was a clear case of unsustainable development. He explained that the local infrastructure was already struggling to keep up with local demand and this site would only add to the issues. He added that the roads were already congested before adding more cars and there were no plans to improve the roads as well as no economic benefits. He commented that roads were to be widened which would cause issues to the already poor walking conditions. He told the committee that this application was contrary to many core policies and that the harms outweighed the benefits.

Councillor Shepherd-Dubey mentioned WBC's past over delivery and that the Council didn't have a 5YHLS so the tilted balance did apply. She added that this meant if the decision was overturned at appeal the inspector could overturn the positives of the development.

Councillor Andrea explained that WBC had no 5YHLS since 2022 and that inspectors had tempered the tilted balance due to the past over delivery of housing. He told Members that the site was outside development limits and contrary to policy CP11. He added that the large scale of the development would've had a large effect on the gap between Wokingham and Barkham as well as a detrimental impact on the wildlife in the area. Other points raised included the removal of 147 trees, the use of artificial light, the SANG including a car park and a manufactured wood replacing ancient woodland. For these reasons Councillor Andrea felt the application should be refused.

Councillor Smith commented that this application was only here because WBC has no 5YHLS. He asked for clarification on the location of the access, following comments from a speaker that the proposed access was owned by the Town Council, and it hadn't been agreed. Andrew Chugg, case officer, clarified that the access from the fields to the east were the ones being referred to but that the exact makeup of the access would be looked at during the reserved matters stage. Councillor Smith mentioned that the access point wasn't ideal after seeing it on the Site Visit. He asked whether he was correct in thinking that half of the traffic would exit via Barkham Road and half would use Blagrove Lane, but that a small amount of traffic would go onto Evendons Lane. Gordon Adam, Highways Development Control, confirmed that this was correct. Councillor Smith referred to the fact that there was no objection from the Council's ecology officer and asked officers if they were confident that the biodiversity issues could be overcome. Andrew Chugg explained that this plan was submitted before it became mandatory for applications to include a 10% biodiversity net gain, so it only needed to have no net loss. He added that there would've been more of a net gain if there wasn't the need to replace the trees.

Councillor Iyengunmwena questioned how the access on Blagrove Lane could be considered safe. Gordon Adam explained that with any new application, there would be a road safety audit that would look at visibility, turning and potential safety impacts. He added that the designer had to provide satisfactory comments in response to concerns raised by the safety auditor, and that this access was considered safe. He also mentioned that any access would still have had four more safety audits before opening. Councillor Iyengunmwena felt that if we were looking at the access now, then the committee should be satisfied now rather than kicking it down the road. Gordon Adam clarified that at the current stage of the process, the access needed to be safe in principle.

Councillor Iyengunmwena mentioned sustainability and referred to Figure 14 in the agenda pack and felt that the site did not provide easy access to existing services and bus

services. Andrew Chugg told the committee that the report mentioned that this site wasn't the most optimal for walking and cycling distances but that there were a range of measures included to improve sustainability. He added that on balance there were no concerns related to sustainability. Councillor Iyengunmwena questioned the number 3 bus route being diverted through the site and asked how it would get back to Barkham Road. Gordon Adam explained that the bus would turn off Barkham Road, go through the site, then onto Blagrove Lane, then back to Barkham Road.

Duncan Fisher, Ecology Specialist, clarified some points made regarding biodiversity and other ecology related issues. He raised a number of issues including how they had mitigated against the loss of woodland and wildlife habitats and that more detail would be given at reserved matters stage.

Gordon Adam, provided some more clarity on the bus route. He told Members that the bus diversion route through the site was proposed by the developer, Reading buses hadn't ruled it out but needed to do a route survey. He added that WBC would receive £914 per house to improve the bus route through the Arborfield Bus Improvement Programme and that WBC had sought contribution from the developer to improve the existing bus route, rather than diverting it through the site. Councillor Smith asked that if the bus route was to remain on Barkham Road, whether that meant the bus route would no longer go through the site. Gordon Adam confirmed that was the case.

Councillor Smith questioned whether the Barkham Square application was in the new LPU, as if it was, the bus network would be very congested. Gordon Adam clarified that when assessing the Highways impact, they could only take on board committee plans, and the current Local Plan.

Councillor Jewell sought clarity from officers on points raised regarding the 5YHLS and Policy CP11. Andrew Chugg told the committee that the Council's Housing Land Supply was 3.2 years so the tilted balance was in play and the harms had to significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits to reject the application. Regarding the site being in the countryside, the case officer explained that the SANG in the north section of the site maintained the separation as well as the additionally planted trees, which screened the gap.

Councillor Munro questioned why a nearby site with just 60 houses was rejected and this site was recommended for approval. Brian Conlon, Operational Lead Development Management, explained that applications needed to be looked at on their own merit. He added that there had been a few recent applications in the same vicinity, and they had all been looked at individually and were all different. He told Members that there were certain parts of the gap between Wokingham and Barkham where single fields remained as the gap so even an application of 60 houses would have a larger effect than this application.

Councillor Akhtar raised the urbanisation of the local countryside as a concern. He asked officers what they thought would happen at an appeal if this was rejected. He added that the potential for 123 affordable homes was a positive. Andrew Chugg responded by telling Members that they couldn't really be drawn on what would potentially happen at appeal. Brian Conlon added that Members should look at recent appeals, examples raised were Watmore Lane and Trowes Lane, which were both major developments. He mentioned that similar issues had been raised at these appeals, such as how tempered the tilted balance was. He invited Members to draw their own conclusions on the sustainability of the site and the permeability of the site with two access roads.

Councillor Bello questioned traffic issues and whether the road to the south of the site would be swamped were this application to be approved. He also asked what 'stopping up' meant on Blagrove Lane. Gordon Adam explained that stopping up referred to the fact that there would be a stopping order for cars on this road and only bikes, pedestrians and emergency vehicles could use this part of the road. He added that there were currently 10-11k vehicles using this road daily and that the daily variation was roughly 10%, he then explained that if the potential increase was within the daily variation, then it was deemed as no impact on the traffic.

Councillor Ng Siu-hong mentioned that this application was outside the development location, wasn't in the Local Plan and disrupted the local wildlife site and felt the committee should reject the application.

Councillor Iyengunmwena questioned whether the modelling done on the bus route was now invalid if officers were saying the bus route was unlikely to go through the site. Gordon Adam explained that the modelling was still valid as the level of traffic from the bus had such a minimal impact. Councillor Iyengunmwena wondered why the roads were so wide on the site if buses were not going to use the road. Andrew Chugg clarified that it was the standard size for two-way vehicles. Brian Conlon added that the report went into some length on walking and cycling, he told the committee that because the application was on the edge of a major development location there would be a degree of walking and cycling but car journeys would also be expected, although short.

Councillor Andrea felt the application was difficult to refuse on traffic concerns or sustainability, as the highways and infrastructure details had been accepted by statutory consultees. He believed that Policy CP11 and the local wildlife sites were the strongest refusal reasons.

Councillor Smith referred to the previously mentioned Watmore Lane and Trowes Lane sites that had been refused and overturned at appeal, he told the committee it wasn't a straight comparison as those two sites had been in the Local Plan.

Brian Conlon explained that the committee should discount areas that were not of concern, rather than jumping to the outcome without the refusal reasons. Councillor Andrea commented that the mitigations were not sufficient for CP11 and the wildlife site, but that sustainability was hard to argue as it was on the edge of a major development location.

Councillor Iyengunmwena referred to page 63, paragraph 157 of the agenda that suggested the use of the motor car would be needed for people living on this site and sought officer's thoughts on the sustainability of the site. Andrew Chugg explained to the committee that the site was not the most sustainable and that other measures would be secured to achieve sustainability such as the bus and walking strategy. He added that it was not the most unsustainable site.

Councillor Smith identified three key areas that may be looked at for refusal reasons, those being the principle of development, permeability and sustainability. He added that sustainability was subjective as if someone was willing to move to the site and happy to always use a car then it wasn't an issue but if someone was to rely on walking and cycling it may be argued that the site wasn't sustainable. Brian Conlon clarified to the committee how the inspector would look at each refusal reason and explained that they are not black and white, he added that people were not forced to live on particular sites, so it would be

up to individuals to decide if the site was suitable for them. He urged committee members to be careful when giving large weight to the Local Plan as there may have been more favourable sites at the time the sites were selected.

Councillor Andrea reiterated his refusal reasons as being the site was contrary to Policy CP11 due to reducing the gap between settlements and permeability due to the two accesses as one can only be achieved by going through a wildlife site. Andrew Chugg referred to Policy CP7 and mentioned that the ecology officer had given mitigations and felt these were suitable to avoid harm in the long term. He added that with Policy CP7 the officers had to look at avoidance, in terms of the access, they had looked at moving it further down the road, but this would still have been in the wildlife site, they couldn't have just one access. He commented that you could ask why they needed to build on that site at all and he explained that this was due to their lack of 5YHLS. He mentioned that the site met the requirements of CP7. Councillor Andrea felt that although technically the SANG was effective mitigation for going through the wildlife site, he didn't feel personally that it was sufficient. Duncan Fisher clarified the selection process for a Local Wildlife Site and made several other points including how it was a positive that there was public access for appreciation of the wildlife. Councillor Jewell added that a positive was that the SANG protected the wildlife area.

The chair called for an adjournment at 21:10 to allow the committee to clarify their proposal.

The Committee resumed at 21:16.

It was proposed by Councillor Andrea and seconded by Councillor Bello that the application be refused on the grounds of principle of development, impact on landscape and countryside and the erosion of separation between settlements.

**RESOLVED:** That application 22306 be refused on the grounds of:

- 1) Principle of development The proposal represents inappropriate unplanned development outside of development limits within the countryside that is contrary to the spatial objectives of the development plan and Policies CP1, CP3, CP6, CP9, CP11 and CP17 of the Core Strategy, Policies CC01, CC02, CC03 and TB21 of the MDD Local Plan, the Borough Design Guide SPD and sections 2, 4, 12 and 15 of the NPPF.
- 2) Erosion of separation between settlements The proposed development would result in the loss of a large proportion of the remaining countryside which separates Wokingham and Barkham, resulting in a detrimental degree of visual and perceived coalescence between these independent settlements, contrary to policies CP1, CP3 and CP11 of the Core Strategy, Policies CC01, CC02, CC03 and TB21 of the MDD Local Plan, the Borough Design Guide SPD, the Wokingham District Landscape Character Assessment and sections 12 and 15 of the NPPF.
- 3) Impact on the landscape and countryside The proposed development would have a detrimental impact on the landscape and character & appearance of the area by reason of the loss of a sizeable section of open and attractive landscape in the countryside, partial loss of Bottle Copse Local Wildlife Site (LWS) with an urbanising large-scale development contrary to policies CP1, CP3 and CP11 of the Core Strategy, Policies CC01, CC02, CC03 and TB21 of the MDD Local Plan, , the

Borough Design Guide SPD, the Wokingham District Landscape Character Assessment and sections 12 and 15 of the NPPF.

- 4) S106 - Thames Basin Heaths SPA In the absence of a planning obligation to secure suitable avoidance and mitigation measures and access management monitoring arrangements, in terms that are satisfactory to the Local Planning Authority (LPA), the LPA is unable to satisfy itself that the proposals include adequate mitigation measures to prevent the proposed development from having an adverse effect on the integrity of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA, in line with the requirements of Regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 as amended and Article 6(3) of Directive 92/43/EEC. The proposal would be contrary to Policy NRM6 of the South East Plan, Policies CP8 and CP4 of the Core Strategy.
- 5) S106 - Affordable Housing In the absence of a completed Legal Agreement, the scheme fails to make adequate provision for affordable housing, contrary to Policy CP5 of the Core Strategy and Section 6 of the NPPF.
- 6) S106 – Highways contributions In the absence of a completed Legal Agreement, the schemes fails to make adequate provision for highways infrastructure, contrary to Policies CP1, CP3, CP4, CP6 and CP10 of the Core Strategy and guidance within the NPPF.
- 7) S106 - Employment Skills Plan In the absence of a completed legal agreement, the proposal fails to secure opportunities for training, apprenticeships and other vocational initiatives to develop local employability skills contrary to MDD Policy TB12.
- 8) S106 – Open Space and Allotments In the absence of a completed Legal Agreement, the schemes fails to make adequate provision for open space and allotment infrastructure, contrary to Policy TB08 of the MDD Local Plan and policy CP3 of the Core Strategy and guidance within the NPPF.

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