Horsham Blueprint Neighbourhood Forum

[redacted]

31 July 2023

Mr Jason Hawkes
Principal Planning Officer
Horsham District Council
Parkside
Chart Way
RH12 1RL

Dear Mr Hawkes

Planning application DC/23/1178 Sports and Leisure Hub supported by 800 homes

I am writing on behalf of the Neighbourhood Forum to object strongly to this application.

Our Steering Group has carefully considered the application which, although outside the immediate area of the Horsham Blueprint Business Neighbourhood Plan, has serious implications for our southern boundary and the wider well-being of our town. Our residents greatly value the rural aspect of our southern boundary - the River Arun, Chesworth Farm, Denne Hill, Denne Park, and beyond towards our neighbour, Southwater. These, and the wider network of footpaths and bridle ways, have for centuries provided both a visual backdrop to the town, vital links into the health-giving countryside and opportunities for quiet informal recreation. More recently, the existing golf course is also a much valued amenity. This application, which seeks to urbanise the area puts this at risk.

This is first and foremost an application for a strategic housing development of up to 800 homes and nearly 2000 residents in a wholly inappropriate location. The proposed intensification of sporting activity, the funding alone for which could never require such a huge number of houses, is ancillary in that without the housing one assumes it would not go ahead as currently devised. However, in any case, this is not a suitable site for a sports and leisure hub.

The site is outside the built-up boundaries of both Horsham town and Southwater Parish, and lies within the green rural gap which is currently an area of ‘quiet recreational use’. It is not identified for housing within the Horsham District Planning Framework or the Southwater Neighbourhood Development Plan. Thus it is should be protected from inappropriate development by HDPF Policy 26 and Policy SNP 1.1 of the SNDP.

A development of 800 homes on this site to the north of the A24 is particularly problematic and contrary to HDPF Policy 27. It would have a significant adverse impact on the rural gap between Horsham and Southwater. This provides a vital buffer against settlement coalescence, important informal leisure links between town and country, an important wildlife corridor, and is an important feature of the River Arun hydrological system. Currently the rural gap provides a real sense of travelling from one clearly defined settlement to another. The coalescence that would be caused by this development would be both real and psychological, undermining the sense of place for residents of both

Southwater and Horsham. Housing on the site would mean the urban footprint of Southwater would breach the A24 for the first time, bringing with it artificial light and considerable additional traffic movements on Worthing Road which is the key settlement corridor. It would also create long term pressure for even more development within the green gap. Development in this location would have an even greater impact on the rural gap between Southwater village and Tower Hill, and thus conflict with SNP 1.3.

The loss of green infrastructure inherent in this application, and the pressure it would put on that which would remain, would be contrary to HDPF Policy 31, SNP7 and SNP9. Covering a substantial area of countryside with new homes, recreational infrastructure and other buildings, roads etc would clearly result in significant loss of green infrastructure. The adjacent parkland has been designated as a priority habitat of 'good quality semi improved grassland'. The Environmental Survey undertaken as part of the planning process confirms the richness of the habitats with four Red Listed Bat species having been identified in the survey and thriving colonies of Great Crested Newts in the network of ponds and culverts built across the old Denne estate. The applicant has dismissed these rare bats as merely "commuting into the site". However, Denne Park's Lime Avenue was planted in 1760, with around 80 veteran trees from the original planting still standing today, and these provide invaluable roost sites for the bats. The configuration of the two-storey driving range and hockey pitches would mean flood lights would be shining directly on to the bat roosts.

The watershed between the Arun and Adur follows a more or less east-west line close to Coltstaple Lane. This means that all of Denne Hill, including Horsham Golf, is within the catchment area of the River Arun. Today the rainfall that falls on Denne Hill is fed directly into the Arun via two routes: first, small ephemeral streams that flow during the autumn and winter and, second, from just below the surface via the Horsham Sandstone Member which collects water during wet periods and then slowly releases it via springs close to Christs Hospital throughout the year and especially during the summer months - a kind of natural flow regulator. According to a recent report from the Environment Agency they believe that due to climate change 44% more rain will fall in the wet season across the Sussex North Water Supply Zone and 44% less rain during the summer. The proposed development at Horsham Golf would create large areas of impermeable surfaces (tarmac, concrete and artificial 4G pitches) which will increase the risk of rapid surface runoff and downstream flooding during periods of intense rainfall. These surfaces would also allow less water to reach the natural flow regulator of the Horsham Sandstone Member jeopardising the flow throughout the drier summer periods. Although this might not have a direct impact on Horsham town itself it will affect other communities and especially the Ancient Woodlands of Sparrow Copse in Christs Hospital.

HDPF Policy 39 states that the release of land will be dependent on there being sufficient capacity in the existing local infrastructure to meet the additional requirements arising from new development. The absence of any plan for local facilities, other than a community shop and a nursery, means that up to 2000 residents would be dependent for almost all aspects of their life on facilities and infrastructure in Southwater and Horsham town. The poor connection (for pedestrians, cycling, bus and car) of the site with Southwater would mean the residents would predominantly use services in Horsham rather than Southwater, and the predominant mode of travel will be by car (the bus service from Hop Oast only operates reasonably frequently during business hours).

The development would have a significant detrimental impact on traffic congestion into Horsham down the single carriageway Worthing Road and narrow bridge over the railway.

This route already suffers from congestion and is considered by many to be the most dangerous route into town for pedestrians and cyclists. The applicant has stated they would like to promote active travel but Active Travel England has objected to the application due to concerns on the safety of the Worthing Road for users as well as major concerns on the other routes promoted by the applicant. As the Worthing Road is sunken into the hill there is limited scope, without major and costly civil engineering works, to widen either the road or the narrow footway alongside the road.

The NHS facilities in Horsham and surrounding areas are inadequate and overwhelmed by existing demand. For example there are no NHS dentists accepting new adult patients and GPs and pharmacies are heavily oversubscribed. These structural deficits will only be worsened by the proposed development.

As far as the proposed leisure facilities are concerned, many of the golfers that use the existing 18-hole course are Horsham residents who like the close proximity of an affordable and "top quality" course so close to the town, reducing the distance they have to travel. Many are retirees who maintain that this golf course keeps them physically fit through the exercise they get from completing 18 holes, and that the peaceful and beautiful natural surroundings of the course and social contact helps with their mental health. The replacement of the course by one of only 9 holes would be a very retrograde step, leading to displacement to other courses and, for example, unsustainable demand for tee times on the Rookwood course. There is also the incompatibility of a Golf Academy without an 18-hole course, and concern about the close proximity of the hockey pitches and "trim trail" to the golf course with the risk of dangerous ball strikes.

Turning to the question of water neutrality, the applicant is proposing to extract groundwater from the Tunbridge Wells Sandstone aquifer below Denne Hill through a series of boreholes. In view of the close proximity of the boreholes to Chesworth Farm where the River Arun flows directly on top of the same aquifer we are concerned that this would have a detrimental impact on the River Arun. At present the aquifer is fully saturated stopping the river from seeping into the aquifer. But given the amount of water it is proposed to extract over many years there is a real risk that the pressure in the aquifer will fall, the level of the water table will drop, and the Arun at Chesworth Farm will start to recharge the aquifer causing water to be lost from the river. Furthermore, the applicant intends to support the aquifer by harvesting rainwater which currently feeds directly into the Arun and would thus be lost to the river under these proposals. The proposal to inject harvested water into the aquifer raises questions of reliability and safety. Finally, the application provides no plan to fund the long term maintenance for such a complex system of water abstraction and injection.

For all these reasons we consider that this planning application should be refused.

Yours sincerely

Ron Bates