

**STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

**DATE: 14 March 2023**

**TIME: 6:30pm**

**LOCATION: Council Chamber**

**MINUTES**

**Present:** *Councillors: Michael Downing (Chair), Adrian Brown (Vice-Chair), Julie Ashley-Wren, Sandra Barr, Teresa Callaghan, Nazmin Chowdhury, Chris Howells, Graham Lawrence CC, Mrs Joan Lloyd, Maureen McKay, Adam Mitchell CC, Claire Parris, Graham Snell, and Anne Wells.*

**Start/End Time:** *Start: 6:30pm  
End: 8:07 pm*

**1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies received.

Councillors Teresa Callaghan and Graham Lawrence CC declared interests in Item 3 relating to the Land North of Stevenage, off North Road and Weston Road, Stevenage, as they were both Members of the Friends of Forster Country. Councillor Lawrence also stated that, along with other Woodfield Ward Members, he had attended a meeting with Friends of Forster Country at which the application had been discussed, but had not participated in any debate and had only listened to what had been said. Both Members remained in the meeting and took part in the deliberation and vote on the item.

**2 MINUTES – 9 FEBRUARY 2023 AND 15 FEBRUARY 2023**

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 9 February 2023 and 15 February 2023 be approved as true records of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

**3 22/00781/RMM – LAND TO THE NORTH OF STEVENAGE, OFF NORTH ROAD AND WESTON ROAD, STEVENAGE**

The Committee considered an application for the Reserved Matters application for the construction of a Country Park including access, layout, and landscaping pursuant to Outline permission 17/00862/OPM, at land north of Stevenage, off North Road and Weston Road, Stevenage.

The Principal Planning Officer gave a presentation to the Committee including approved parameter plans detailing the spine road and link roads, the local community centre, the residential sites, the primary school site and the Country Park, green spaces, and drainage as well as density levels for the site.

Members were reminded that an application for outline planning permission had come before the Committee in 2020, and that this was the third of four applications relating to the reserved matters application for the site, with the first two being approved:

- Phase 1A-C residential 243 units
- Infrastructure
- Country Park
- Phase 1D Conservation Area residential 115 units

The Principal Planning Officer advised that the current application sought reserved matters approval for the provision of a 38-hectare Country Park on land located to the east of the site. The provision of this accessible open space would include the provision of –

- A single storey, green flat roof toilet block
- A 50-space car park (including disabled parking and EV spaces)
- Various foot and cycleways creating perimeter paths and desire line paths around and through the site varying in width up to a maximum of 3.5m and consisting of bound gravel or mown grass.
- Two dry, grass lined flood attenuation basins (SuDS basin, swales and deep borehole soakaways located in Country Park but approved under the Infrastructure application)
- Land remodelling to include a ‘mound’ in the northern field of the proposed Country Park
- Introduction of new field barriers through additional tree and landscaping planting to recreate historic field de-lineation
- Creation of hay and wildflower meadows across the fields, with possible animal grazing in the north eastern field
- Creation of a community orchard
- Street furniture, including benches, cycle stands, bins and directional signage posts.

The Chair then invited Jo Unsworth from Savills on behalf of the Developers Bellway Homes and Miller Homes to address the Committee. She informed the Committee that

the principal use of the land as a country park was established by policy NH8 of the Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) Local Plan and the approved outline consent. She highlighted that this application detailed the aspects of the Country Park, the facilities to support it, as well as how it would be managed in the long term.

Ms Unsworth advised that the primary objective of the Country Park was to open up currently private farmland and provide an accessible space for Stevenage residents. This would include new accessible gravel pathways on the current public rights of way, suitable for wheelchairs, pushchairs, and cyclists, as well as bridleways, and would be wide enough to prevent conflict between users. The facilities including the toilet block, car park, and picnic area would ensure the Country Park could be enjoyed by all.

Ms Unsworth also advised that another key objective was to return the land to what it was in E. M. Forster's time. The park would be planted as a wildflower meadow and hedges that reinstated the historic field pattern and benefitted the conservation area. The car park and toilet block within the Country Park boundaries were to be owned and managed by SBC and so were located in the least sensitive area to minimise the impact. The northern part of the park would utilise topsoil from elsewhere in the development to prevent the greater environmental cost of transporting it offsite.

Ms Unsworth acknowledged that there would be some harm to heritage assets, however this was assessed to be less than substantial, and the public benefit outweighed this. She informed Members that Country Park ownership would be passed to SBC once completed and there was a nearly £2m contribution to SBC to maintain the park.

The Chair then invited Chris Naylor from the Friends of Forster Country, an objector, to address the Committee. Mr Naylor advised that the Committee should defer the application in order to work together to deliver a truly inclusive asset, as no local groups had been involved in the consultation process. He suggested that the Country Park plan was different to the St Nicholas Meadows, as set out in the original outline approval. This Country Park would cause harm to the conservation area and settings and the park was intended to reduce the overall harm of the residential development.

Mr Naylor advised that the Council held no data on car park utilisation in country parks and this car park was 2.5x bigger than the one in Great Ashby park. There was also a 40-car car park on Weston Road. He advised this country park was 10x smaller than the average country park and therefore believed it did not need toilet blocks. He felt that the dumped material would ruin the topography of a heritage landscape and the waste should be disposed of appropriately. In terms of the path width, he suggested that 1.5m-2m was wide enough for wheelchairs according to a disability group Paths for All.

The Chair thanked both speakers for their contribution to the meeting.

The Principal Planning Officer then presented landscaping plans which included additional hedgerow, field barrier planting, footpaths and bridleways, flood alleviation, toilet block, car park, and the additional landscaping of the orchard and grazing field. She advised there would be pedestrian access connection between the Country Park and the North Hertfordshire District Council development.

The Committee were advised the positioning of the new car park and toilet block would be close to the residential development of Phase 2. This would also be near the new grounding tower that would be constructed and provided by UKPN. The Principal Planning Officer highlighted the Phase 1D site, which had not yet been considered by the Committee, where there would be dense planting for screening. She advised that there would be bench provisions and wayfinding markers showing bridlepath areas. The community orchard would have a new access pathway onto Weston Road. In relation to the toilet block, the Members were presented with plans detailing the proposed design including a flat grass seed roof, as well as a storage area for SBC maintenance.

The Committee were presented with visuals of what the Country Park would look like, both initially and when fully grown. This included visuals of the footpaths, field barriers, car park, and toilet block, as well as the residential area in the background.

The Principal Planning Officer gave the Committee a few updates on the application. The Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust had agreed that the amended changes were acceptable, and the Council drainage consultant had confirmed the provided details were acceptable to allow approval, but further details were required through the discharge of conditions 35 and 36 appended to the outline permission. A list of recommended revised conditions was also circulated.

A Member highlighted the doubt raised regarding the quality of the consultation and what groups were consulted. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) advised that there was an extensive consultation across the Borough during the Local Plan and a wide range of statutory parties were consulted.

Members agreed that the Country Park should be made accessible, and this was the opportunity to create a successful country park. A number of Members expressed concerns over some elements of the application. Some Members felt that the car park was bigger than needed and questions were raised as to whether it was necessary to have one, in view of the existing car park in Weston Road Cemetery. However, another Member suggested a car park was necessary for accessibility. Members asked whether there was a need for a toilet block, and another had a concern regarding its design. Another concern was raised around the mound being used to dispose of other materials than the topsoil stated in the application. There was also concern with the access to Weston Road, as Members agreed that this was a small road without any pathways and would be dangerous to have pedestrian and cyclist accessing directly onto the road.

In response to the concerns raised by Members, Officers advised:

- The car park was a requirement from the SBC Green Spaces Team who would take over maintenance of the Country Park. Another use of the car park was to ensure the park was accessible for everyone. It was also to prevent country park users parking in the residential streets of the approved development.
- The need for a toilet block was raised and there was a commitment to provide a toilet block to enable greater accessibility to the park.
- In relation to the mound, it was not a cheaper way of removing topsoil but was a planning balance to reduce the environmental impact.
- The connection of the Country Park to Weston Road was located at the end of the lane, which was a dead end, and was not onto the Canterbury Way connection. There were no footpaths proposed as it was put forward to Hertfordshire Country Council to advise on this connection, but they had confirmed that although it did not have footpaths and was a narrow area, it led to a dead end and therefore was accommodating of the provision.

Another Member asked a question regarding the biodiversity uplift detailed in the report and what the calculations were of the baseline figure, the initial figures and the figures after the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) made changes. The Principal Planning Officer advised that the biodiversity uplift had been taken into account as part of the outline application, and it had found that the country park took most of the uplift from the residential area. This data was required so that Members were aware of the current standing with national government levels and the Councils Biodiversity SPD.

In response to a question from a Member regarding the safety and access to the car park Officers advised that there was a provision for a height restriction barrier on the access road which had conditions asking for further details. The car park would be managed by SBC Direct Services and had lockable gates that would be closed out of hours.

In response to a question from a Member regarding the costs of maintenance of the park, Officers advised that SBC would maintain the park and as part of the outline application and Section 106 agreement, there was a financial contribution to be paid by the developers for the ongoing management of the park and that this maintenance package was for 20 years.

A Member asked a question regarding the field management and whether SBC had the skills to fulfil this. Additionally, he asked what animals would graze on the field. The Principal Planning Officer advised that a management plan had been laid out for the field maintenance which the Green Spaces Team were content with, and to which

the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust had agreed. In terms of the grazing field, this was a potential future use and SBC were still looking into the details.

It was proposed and seconded that the application be deferred for the reasons set out below.

Following a vote, it was **RESOLVED**: That the application 22/00871/RMM be **DEFERRED** for the following reasons:

- The provision of a comparison between the baseline assessment for biodiversity net gain for the Country Park and the re-assessment of the baseline assessment by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust
- The carrying out of further consultation on the Country Park proposals with other groups/organisations, such as disability groups, schools and local community groups/residents, and consideration be given to obtaining advice from the National Trust
- Further discussions with the applicant regarding the 'mound' to be created in the Country Park using materials displaced as part of the approved residential development under Reserved Matters applications 22/00808/RM and 22/00810/RMM
- Further discussions with the applicant regarding a more imaginative design of the car park toilet block
- Further discussions with the applicant regarding the highway safety along Weston Road/Great Ashby
- Further discussions with the applicant/HCC Highway regarding the width of the footways to be provided across the site
- Further justification for the size of the car park.

#### **4 INFORMATION REPORT – DELEGATED DECISIONS**

Noted.

#### **5 INFORMATION REPORT – APPEALS/CALLED IN APPLICATIONS**

Noted.

#### **6 URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

Planning applications 22/00808/RMM and 22/00810/RMM – Land to the North of Stevenage, off North Road and Weston Road, Stevenage

In relation to the above applications, which had been granted permission by the Committee at its meeting held on 9 February 2023, the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) advised that a number of conditions had been amended by officers to reflect the accurate Plan numbers and to incorporate extra information that had since been provided.

## **7 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

Not required.

## **8 URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

Chair