

02 MAR 2023

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25th February 2023

To West Berkshire Council,

RE: WBC LPR Regulation 19 Objection

I am writing to voice my concern and objection to the proposed development of approx. 2500 home in North- East Thatcham as I believe the plan to be unsound.

The effects of this proposal are devastating for the town of Thatcham, and I imagine there will be plenty of objections from its residents, but my arguments are principally focussed on the village of Upper Bucklebury and the adverse impact on our community.

It is impossible to overestimate the negative impact this development will have on Upper Bucklebury. Whichever way you look at it, with the development creeping up the hill, Upper Bucklebury will all but merge with Thatcham, separated only by a small copse at the end of Long Grove. This cannot be a good thing for the identity of our village and for the peace, tranquillity, and security of our community.

I understand the need for development and accept that we must build more homes, but I question the need to build as many as 2500 in Thatcham, irrespective of current targets. It seems a totally disproportionate allocation in an area where so little of the land is developable due to AONB and flood plains. The plans would have been in place well before the Covid pandemic, so would it not be sensible to review the requirements given the changing nature of our demographics and working patterns since then? If the plan was to house commuters to London, who knows how many will still want to, or be required to, work in London (or in any office) in the post-Covid world? If the work pattern continues to favour a work-from-home arrangement, then who will choose to come and live in such an expensive area? Also, with the birth rate dropping and local primary schools not filling all classes in some year groups, will we see half empty classrooms in the proposed new school(s)? It will be more likely that the school(s) will not get built at all.

If, however, these new houses were purchased by keen commuters and assuming people returned to office work in London, then I struggle to see how Thatcham train station will cope with the hundreds of extra cars that would need to be parked there. Not everyone will be walking to the station and the facilities there would just not be adequate.

Transport

It was interesting to hear in an initial presentation last year of the estimated 12% increase in traffic heading up Harts Hill towards Upper Bucklebury. This is already significant on such a dangerous hill, but unfortunately is probably an overly conservative estimate. It will not take long before the increased congestion on the A4 and Floral Way (already congested at peak times) leads to more Rat Run traffic through our village and Cold Ash too. As well as environmental and noise concerns, many parents will be concerned for the safety of their children in the village especially as they walk to and from school.

The addition of an exit from the new development on to Harts Hill in the new plan will only exacerbate the problem as vehicles exiting here will be heading up Harts Hill to access the A34 or M4 westbound via Cold Ash or through Upper Bucklebury, Chapel Row and Southend Bradfield to access the M4. This latter route will also cause serious congestion at peak times at the junction with the A340 at Theale.

Harts Hill is already a dangerous road without pavements, and I believe the increase in traffic on this road will just be a recipe for more serious accidents.

The plan to build a car park halfway up Harts Hill is also a cause for concern. Apart from not being sure of its purpose, it will only add even more traffic to the Hill and could just become another prime location for intimidating gatherings and antisocial behaviour.

Healthcare

There are serious concerns over healthcare provision to accompany the new development. Although there is a (small, inadequate) primary healthcare facility provided for in the plan, it is my understanding that a development proposal of the size of this one should have a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) in place outlining how the details of the proposal have been discussed with the health service providers. Only a positive impact outcome of these discussions would support the proposal, but it is of grave concern that we have no evidence that either the developers or West Berkshire Council have organised an HIA.

To compound this concern, since the NHS are struggling to recruit new GPs and are not opening many new practices anywhere, it is unlikely we will get a new GP practice in Thatcham at all and the current provision would not be able to cope with the huge increase in population this new development would bring. Thatcham Health Centre, Burdwood and Chapel Row are already bursting at the seams.

Neither local GP practices nor local dental practices appear to have been consulted on the potential impact of the development on these vital services and as a result only woefully inadequate and unrealistic provision has been made in the plan.

Environment

The inevitable increase of visitors to our village/parish and Bucklebury Common can only have a detrimental effect on our local environment. The ancient woodlands, meadows and wildlife need to be protected. Bucklebury Parish Council say on their website: " Loss of habitats or habitat change as a result of inappropriate management are one of the most damaging threats facing rare species in Berkshire. These habitats should be safeguarded wherever possible and appropriate advice sought on managing them to conserve the natural diversity of life and to halt the extinction of species diversity not only in Berkshire but also in the UK. "

If this development were to go ahead, these precious woodlands and rare habitats would almost certainly be under threat with a substantial increase in the visitor numbers – our woodlands would be a short hop for the residents of the new development compared to anywhere else in Thatcham and the surrounding area they could walk (or drive!) to.

We can see no evidence that the new plans provide for adequate green spaces or for the protection of biodiversity. With an estimated 4,000 more people housed in the new development needing access to green spaces, there can only be a negative impact as they all spill out on to Bucklebury Common and the adjacent AONB.

I was bemused by the proposal of a 'Country Park' in the original plan (now interestingly changed to 'Community Park') and have some reflections on this. In reality, it is a steep bit of land that would be too difficult and expensive to build on, so it is conveniently turned into a 'Country (or Community?) Park'. It would be interesting to know what this park would look like. Steep slopes do not really lend themselves to informal recreation and we can see no evidence of budget allocated to maintain it long term. All discussions around the proposed park and its protection seem very unclear.

Education

New educational establishments seem to be part of the plan but the details on this are insufficient and contradictory. WBC has an obligation to provide education facilities for all children in West Berkshire, but there is no detail on how they will do this with the addition of an undetermined number of new children housed in the new development.

It appears that the developers will provide a sum of money toward building a new primary school, but the timing of the building of said school is not clear (or whether they will provide sufficient funding). Unless it is built first, there is the risk they will not be built at all since anyone already living in the new houses will necessarily have already found a school solution for their children.

Similarly for secondary school provision. A contribution by the developers may be insufficient and it is unclear what the provision will look like (we are given no details on proposed location so there is no assessment on the impact on traffic). If government guidelines stipulate that schools with less than a 6-form entry are unsustainable, we would be looking at a new school with at least a 6FE. However, we appear to have no evidence on the number of pupils that the school would need to cater for, so the number of form entries is not stipulated in the plan. Interestingly, the Development Plan states that a development of 2,500 houses would not provide enough pupils to fill a 6-8 FE school suggesting a smaller school would be needed, but anything smaller than a 6FE school is unfeasible. Unsound again.

Conclusion

In summary, I would like to register my objection to these plans in the strongest terms. The impact on the village of Upper Bucklebury will be immeasurable. With increased traffic, a steady flow of visitors seeping in and the consequential damage to the local environment, the character of our peaceful village will change forever and not for the better. These issues, together with the lack of evidence that adequate provision of educational and healthcare facilities has been incorporated in the proposal make the Local Plan completely unsound in my view.

I would urge WBC to reconsider the whole plan, given that housing allocations previously set are now only advisory. There is no longer a requirement to build 2,500 homes, so alternative, smaller sites can be sought for a reduced number of new homes. Please follow the lead of other Local Authorities who have paused their plans based on previous housing allocations and work on a revised plan later in the year based on new planning guidance that could mean a vastly reduced number of new houses.

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