

Upper Bucklebury, 22nd February 2023

To West Berkshire Council,

WEST BERKSHIRE
COUNCIL

02 MAR 2023

DEVELOPMENT & REGULATION

RE: WBC LPR Regulation 19 Objection

With this letter I am voicing my concerns and objections to the proposed development of approx. 2500 home in North- East Thatcham as I believe the plan to be unsound, not carefully thought out and potentially detrimental to Thatcham and all the surrounding villages. My main concerns are that I feel this area is already 'full' from the point of view of traffic, amenities, schools, healthcare provision. It is also an area that everyone proudly calls Rural Berkshire, because for the time being, that is what it is. It would appear that is not to last. 'Rural' suggests looking after the environment, the ecology and biodiversity of the area, none of which seems to have been taken into account with this very large development. It is the same as squeezing another town, with the population of Hungerford into an area much smaller than Hungerford with none of the space, amenities and roads and in so doing, getting rid of some very important countryside at a time when we are supposed to be protecting our natural world. Very strange plan indeed.

I do totally understand the need for development and the requirement for more housing throughout the country, but I question the need to build as many as 2500 in Thatcham, especially as it has been seen that we no longer need to meet the numbers set by the Government. I write 'in Thatcham', but actually this is not in Thatcham at all, it is to the North East – almost like a separate town and the people living there would not be integrated into the town at all, most of them would be taking a car to drive there and park....well, where would they all park? So, the planning officer in one of the zoom meetings who said that Thatcham was in need of regeneration and improvement has clearly not looked closely at the location chosen. Also, this does seem to be an allocation out of all proportion in an area where so much of the land is taken up by AONB and flood plains. I wonder who the houses are for? The people wouldn't be a part of Thatcham and would need their cars to get anyway, maybe the houses are intended for commuters. But since Covid, the pattern of working has changed, and there are not so many people requiring to commute to London. Why would they therefore choose to purchase houses in what was considered 'Commuter belt' at 'Commuter belt' prices, when they can choose to live somewhere cheaper and work from home. Should the number of houses not be reviewed in this very changed world? 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)? And when this is considered, will the schools actually be built? Thus not fulfilling the promise made by the Property Developers.

I really believe that the effects of this proposal are devastating for the town of Thatcham. I can only see this as destroying the town, not supporting, and improving it. But I am also very concerned from the point of view of the villages to the North of this development and the adverse effect the development will have on the roads, education, environment, healthcare and general quality of life. I imagine many of the people in Thatcham will be concerned about the same aspects from their point of view. It affects everyone. Looking from the

aspect of the villages, 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, and there will be a solid line of traffic going to, from and through the village. This cannot be a good thing for the identity of our village and for the peace, tranquillity, and security of our community, all the reasons that people choose to come and live in a village.

There are so many sides to my concerns that it is hard to know where to start and this would be a document of many many pages if I were to write them all, so I will concentrate on the main ones of traffic, environment and amenities. All amenities will be affected, but I will focus for now on education and healthcare.

Traffic

I live in Upper Bucklebury and work in Thatcham. As I drive out of my road in Upper Bucklebury, it can take me a while to get onto Broad Lane because of the traffic, especially if there is an issue with a water leak, or roadworks or other disruption on Harts Hill – this is a frequent occurrence. I then have a choice. I can go along the Ridge towards Cold Ash, where I get caught up in a long stream of cars filtering one by one in to St Finian's School and then wait at the junction at Cold Ash for a space in the stream of cars; or I can go down Harts Hill where I get caught behind a lorry or a bike which slows down the stream of traffic or I get held up due to a water leak or yet another accident – one frosty day there were 3 different accidents in one morning; my other choice is to wind through the narrow country roads and drive down the single track in Cox's Lane, reversing a number of times to allow other vehicles to pass. Now, I am wondering how this picture will look if we add potentially over 1,000 vehicles to any of those routes. And I feel that is a conservative estimation, because with 2,500 houses, there could easily be 5,000 vehicles and if the M4 or A4 are closed or have hold ups, or Floral Way has works on it, many of those vehicles will be taking those routes. What a nightmare and how dangerous that will be. Some years ago, Harts Hill was closed for several weeks, the impatience caused and the dangerous driving in the country roads resulting from this was horrifying. I feel this same story could be written by anyone living in Cold Ash, Upper Bucklebury, Chapel Row, Southend Bradfield, Beenham and Midgham.

Apart from getting to work, I am also wondering about the effect of so many more vehicles at the level crossing in Thatcham, where we already frequently wait in a long line of traffic for upwards of 15 minutes at a time, so time as long as 25 minutes. And if these houses are purchased by commuters, how will the existing station car park, station and level crossing cope with that large influx of cars?

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, ancient hay meadows, heathland 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 would be walking or driving 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.

Also, talk of creating a Country Park, which I see has been changed to Community Park, in the strip at the top of the development does not really seem to make sense, as there is already very good countryside there from the woods next to Upper Bucklebury to the A4, an area where many people walk, and a lot of wildlife exists and has existed for hundreds of years. Also, what is a Community Park? Suitably vague I guess. It makes me suspicious that nothing will be done to it, the developers simply realise that it is too steep to build on. I have no faith at all that they have even thought about the countryside they are destroying.

Amenities – healthcare and education

The issues of Healthcare can never be underestimated, especially now when our NHS struggles to keep up with the numbers in every area, finding it hard to offer the service required to keep the population healthy and safe. I see there is a small 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. It is concerning that we have no evidence that either the developers or West Berkshire Council have organised an HIA. Also, since the NHS are struggling to recruit new GPs throughout the country, they 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 overstretched, with people unable to get appointments for, at times, many weeks. There is not a local A and E, so this would add at a minimum 4,000 potential patients to travel on the local roads to the hospitals in Reading, Basingstoke or Oxford.

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 inadequate and unrealistic provision has been made in the plan.

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 towards building a new primary school, but the timing of the building of this school is not clear or even if there is funding for it. 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 solution for their children in the existing schools.

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 house 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. This clearly has not been thought through enough.

To Conclude

To conclude, I would like to register my very strong objection to these plans. The impact on the countryside, the town of Thatcham itself, the village of Upper Bucklebury and indeed all the villages North of Thatcham will be immeasurable. With increased traffic, a steady flow of visitors seeping in and the consequential damage to the local environment, the character of the countryside and the peaceful villages will change forever and not for the better. There is no going back if this is allowed, and I am certain there will be many regrets when all the above issues prove reality, but it will be TOO LATE. 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.

As Government housing allocations are now only advisory and no longer an obligation, I would urge WBC to reconsider the whole plan and look at what you would be actually creating in reality rather than just on paper. 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, with a lower impact on any one community. Please follow the lead of other Local Authorities all around the country, who have wisely 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.

[REDACTED]
Katie Powell, [REDACTED]
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