

From: Steve Maines [REDACTED]
Sent: 14 April 2021 17:04
To: Planning Comments
Cc: laura.trott.mp@parliament.uk
Subject: 19/05000/HYB, Amended Application-proposed development of 635 houses at Fort Halstead.

Importance: High

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14th April 2021

Ms. Claire Shearing, Case Officer
Planning Policy
Sevenoaks District Council
Council Offices, Argyle Road,
Sevenoaks
Kent TN13 1HG

to: planning.comments@sevenoaks.gov.uk and laura.trott.mp@parliament.uk

Ref: 19/05000/HYB, Amended Application—proposed development of 635 houses at Fort Halstead.

Dear Ms. Shearing,

My wife and I believe that the area north of the M25 is being targeted with a disproportionate number of residential developments, I understand that there are a number of sites in our area, entailing destruction of significant areas of the Green Belt. The cumulative impact on the area will needlessly contribute to urban sprawl and severely impact rural communities to their detriment. The development at Fort Halstead and now the expansion of the proposed development to 635 properties—alongside the 62 existing residential properties—will dwarf surrounding village communities, which typically do not exceed 500 residences. How on earth does this cramming of properties onto the site, fit in with a rural area?

The area has hardly any public transport left. Recently, one of only two bus services via Knockholt was axed. As for trains, Knockholt station is 2.5 miles from the village and has extremely limited parking capacity. We are an aging population living in Kent's highest village—cycling for most people is out of the question. Additionally, Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association has advised that services are already configured for a maximum of 10 coaches while the Kent Route Study shows there is no capacity for any extra trains on the congested local lines into London. Put simply, it is standing room only now and rail can't cope with a potential 600+ more new commuters.

With poor transport links, residents today are forced to rely heavily on cars and walking. If 635 houses are added at Fort Halstead, that will likely see at least 1,200 more cars spilling onto our narrow, rural lanes which do not have pavements or street lighting. It is imperative that the Star Hill Road access remains restricted to emergency services vehicles and buses only. Both villages already have serious issues with the amount of traffic using the roads through Knockholt and Halstead which are used as rat-runs, speeds of 60mph on our 30mph-limited roads have been recorded. Should the entry/exit onto Star Hill Road be allowed for general use, despite Sevenoaks District Council's (SDC) pledge not to do so, the traffic impact would be devastating.

As for Star Hill itself, it's very steep, narrow, has no pedestrian pavements, has a series of hairpin bends with no visibility, and over weekends is heavily used by cyclists and cycle clubs as part of the Seven Hills challenge. It has been the scene of several major accidents, including a fatality. Should the existing exit, from Ford Halstead onto Star Hill become available for general use, congestion and the accident risk will rise hugely.

Kent County Council has a very poor record in maintaining the roads most in Knockholt and Halstead have had little or no proper resurfacing for over 30 years and are a patchwork quilt of bumpy pothole repairs. Fort Halstead's main exit, onto Polhill Road, is itself a major example of the lack of maintenance. Polhill used to have four-lanes on the steepest part. The Joint Transport Meeting of September 2006, noting both verge failure and carriageway instability, closed off one of the downward lanes structural issues with the carriageway over the years have not been addressed with the result that the downhill carriageway width has been cut in half.

Turning to local services, shops, public transport, schools, medical facilities, and the under-developed infrastructure, all will be overwhelmed by this small town-sized development. SDC's original excuse for its U-turn on approving 450 houses in 2015 was that the scheme would be 'Employment Led.' The developer is now seeking to build 635 houses with 2.77 hectares of land (down 26% from the original 3.6 hectares) allocated for commercial development. As SDC admitted when it granted permission for the 'employment-led' scheme, we are talking about Green Belt land (SDC's exact words at the time were: 'a Major Employment Site in the Green Belt.')

These hybrid applications, as the developer has shown, are dangerous because SDC has already granted permission to build on Green Belt land. So what happens with this one when the developer says it can't market the commercial allocation and asks for yet more houses? There is now a small industrial area with no guarantee of any significant take-up. Adding further houses to this development means it can no longer be described as 'Employment Led'.

This is a Green Belt site with large swathes of ancient woodland and grazing land. There's also a question mark over contamination at certain areas used by Ministry of Defence organisations. The Fort Halstead developers seemed to acknowledge its value in their original application, stating that their development would: 'Help protect other less-developed areas of the Green Belt from potential release'. In this context, one must reflect on the planning application recently submitted by Quinn Estates for about 1,000 houses on the former Broke Hill Golf Course, which is virtually adjacent to Fort Halstead. Broke Hill is both Green Belt land and an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Sevenoaks District Council did not support this proposal and it was opposed by the Kent Downs AONB Unit at the inquiry. The Planning Inspector rejected the idea.

“The Inspector said the site was not in a sustainable location as its inhabitants would have to travel a considerable distance to access transport, shopping, and other facilities and that the development was not needed to meet the district's future development requirements”.

“In practice,” SDC stated, “this means that large-scale housing development at the site is unlikely to be granted planning permission.”

Since then, nothing has really changed in terms of it being ‘a sustainable location’. It’s only assorted governments’ various targets for housing that have seen the Green Belt increasingly under threat.

We believe the Government National Planning current Policy Framework regarding the Green Belt states:

- It should check against unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas
- Prevent neighbouring areas merging into one another.
- Safeguard the countryside from encroachment.

We both believe that there are absolutely no ‘exceptional circumstances’ that should allow Fort Halstead to breach those aims. With the collapse of the current ‘Employment-Led’ excuse to despoil the Green Belt, we ask SDC to reject the revised planning application at Fort Halstead.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen & Sara Maines.

Sent by email planning.comments@sevenoaks.gov.uk