

LODGE FARM INQUIRY

22nd to 25th October 2019

Closing Statement by Peter Lerner MA, DipTP, MRTPI

on behalf of Bray Parish Council

and Campaign to Protect Rural England, Berkshire Branch

I hope that nobody will object to me addressing you in what I intend to be plain English, rather than legalese or indeed plannerese. I am conscious that I am representing two organisations here who will appreciate the issues, as I see them, being clearly spelled out.

So, it's time for a something of a reality check after three and a bit days in this room. What have we learned at this Inquiry?

- This appeal is about putting 150 houses on undeveloped Green Belt land in Holyport. Why are we looking at this now? Because the appellants have had no luck to date in persuading the Council that this land should be developed, and therefore hope to pre-empt the lengthy Borough Local Plan process. The Local Plan process is of course the way that strategic planning should be done. Why are we talking about this piece of Holyport rather than any other Green Belt site? Because, of course, the appellants have an interest in this site. We can however be sure that if this appeal is successful, similar attempts to gain planning permission for housing on other Green Belt land in the Borough will be put forward by other developers, on other land. The arguments which those developers will put forward will no doubt be similar to those which we have heard here this week. may be repeated by other developers with regard to other Green Belt land in the Borough. For those who care about the Green Belt in the Royal Borough, this is an appeal which must be rejected.
- The appeal is also about putting a doctors surgery, a community park, football pitches, allotments and a community building on the site - stop press, the community building has been taken out of the equation, but we are nevertheless assured that this is not a pick-and-mix of goodies. Does the local community want any of these? According to my clients, the local Parish Council, the answer is a very clear no. Evidence has been presented to the Inquiry that none of these are necessary, and certainly that neither one, some or all of these added-on goodies will turn an unacceptable plan for housing in the Green Belt, into a good plan.
- Does anybody other than the appellants think this development is a good idea? The Council's report to the Maidenhead Planning Panel records that out of 190 representations originally received regarding the planning application, 5 (that is 2.6%) were in favour of the development.

A further 183 letters objecting to the development were received by the Council when they twice readvertised the application following amendments, with nobody else writing in favour. One person who has attended this Inquiry has told the Inspector that he is in favour.

You might anticipate that my clients, CPRE, would not support a major housing development in the Green Belt. But it is also opposed by the local Bray Parish Council, who wrote three times to the Planning Authority to object to the development and have cared sufficiently about their local environment to fund my appearance on their behalf at this Inquiry. It is opposed by the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, the local planning authority, in a cogent and persuasively worded report. It is also opposed in a heartfelt letter from the local Member of Parliament, the Rt Hon Theresa May MP, whose letter demonstrates that she well understands the rules of the game, the NPPF, Green Belt policy, the purpose of a Conservation Area and the impact of development on local infrastructure, and comes out on all counts against the development.

- Does the detail of the scheme not indicate that this will be a beautifully designed development, sympathetic in all respects to the existing well loved and high quality local environment. No. There is no detail, although there are some “illustrative drawings”, the actual status of which, to me at least, remains somewhat unclear. The Inspector has indicated that he might wish to take them into account. This is legally an outline planning application, with all matters (except access) reserved. No detailed information regarding appearance, landscaping, layout or scale was submitted with the planning application for the public - or the local planning authority - to consider, which some might see as an outrage, given that the development site abuts, and partly lies within, one of the loveliest Conservation Areas in this part of the country .
- Would allowing this appeal be consistent with the application of Green Belt policy locally? Both I, and the local Councillor, Leo Walters, attempted to bring before the Inquiry a small number of very recent appeal decisions within Bray Parish where different Inspectors declined to permit developments, within the Green Belt, on considerably smaller sites than this appeal site. These decisions were waved away by the appellants, as irrelevant, relating to different circumstances. This is despite the fact that the appellants had no hesitation in asking the Inspector to carefully consider various appeal decisions from further distant locations which they believe strongly support their own case. I believe that the community locally is entitled to expect that the policies to protect the Green Belt, which are a much trumpeted, well understood and very successful achievement of both local and planning policy, will be applied consistently. We can be sure that local people will find it hard to understand if small scale developments in the Green Belt, in their own Parish, are turned down, while well resourced developers are able to gain planning permissions for major developments which would entirely change, for the worse, the character of their much loved community.

- What about the Council's strategies for directing and managing housebuilding? We accept that they currently do not have a five year supply of housing land, and we know that they have struggled to get their latest Local Plan over the line. However, that Local Plan is currently at Examination; the Council is pulling out all stops to meet the Examination Inspector's requirements; and we are aware that the very recently retired Council Leader obtained much publicity locally with his promise that the Borough Local Plan would ensure that 100% of its objectively assessed housing need, up to 2033, would be met. I have no reason to doubt, from my understanding of the position, that this view is shared by the current Leader, and indeed the report to Council at its meeting of 23rd October states unequivocally "The Council is committed to having a post 2004 Act and up to date plan in place which meets 100% of the housing and employment needs arising to 2033". Sadly for the Appellants, the Council do not currently intend to achieve this target with the help of the current appeal site, but it is the view of myself and my clients that this battle should be properly fought at the ongoing Local Plan Inquiry, rather than by the planning appeal process, which smacks of an attempt to queue-jump.
- Did the protracted, half day discussion on the status of individual sites in and around the Borough shed any light on the issue? No, it demonstrated that two sets of experts were unable to agree a set of figures. It neatly side-stepped the elephant in the room, which was why are we spending so much time arguing about the detail of various pieces of land in Sunningdale and Maidenhead, rather than focussing on this proposed development on this particular piece of Green Belt land in the village of Holyport?
- What about the Conservation Area? Holyport, centred upon its Conservation Area, is a Berkshire village celebrated for its individuality and beauty. It is an insult to those residents who for generations have looked after their historic properties, to suggest that a new development of 150 houses, of which we have absolutely no detail - layout, design or materials, is going to enhance the local environment and the precious Conservation Area.

I am sure that it is very clear that this development is completely unacceptable to the great majority of local people - and to the two hard working and sincere organisations which I represent - as to permit it would shoot a hole right through the well understood and valued policies relating to Green Belts and to Conservation, leading to a loss of faith and trust in the fairness and objectivity of our planning system. We acknowledge of course that there is a general need for housing in the Royal Borough, but are confident that this is being actively addressed by the Borough Local Plan, whose Examination is ongoing. We ask the Inspector not to be sidetracked by the additional, un-sought for and unwanted "benefits" offered to the local community by the Appellants, and request the Inspector to dismiss this appeal.

Finally, may I say that I do not think that I am the only person in the room who has found this relatively new type of Public Inquiry, with Round Table sessions interspersed with traditional examination and cross-examination, somewhat difficult to adapt to. If the Planning Inspectorate in due course is intending to reflect on this recent process and seek the views of users, I for one would be very pleased to contribute.

Thank you on behalf of Bray Parish Council and the CPRE Berkshire Branch for allowing me to speak.

Peter Lerner MA, DipTP, MRTPI 25th October 2019