Application No. O/2001/3308 **Received 6.2.2001** **Wokingham**

Applicant: **Linden Homes Developments Ltd.**
Location : **Land south of Roberts Grove and Blagrove Lane, Wokingham**
Proposal : **Outline application for proposed residential development comprising 2, 3, 4 and 5 bedroomed dwellings including those for key workers at an average density of 40 dwellings per hectare – site area 7.6 ha. (5 ha. of development land).**

1. **Introduction** – This 7.6 ha. site is located on the eastern side of Blagrove Lane, south of Roberts Grove and north of Evendons Lane. It comprises open fields bound in part by hedgerows and trees. To the north of the site are stables and paddocks. The site is bound by residential development characterised by detached houses to the north, located in Roberts Grove, and residential development to the south predominantly semi-detached and detached dwellings which front Evendons Lane. To the west is Blagrove Lane, a narrow country lane, sunken for part of its length and to the east, public open space known as Viking Field and Leslie Sears Field to the north east.

   Within the South East Area Local Plan the site is located outside the settlement boundary in a rural area and within the Wokingham District Local Plan it is in a rural area which is also designated as a green gap/wedge. The site was considered at the Local Plan Inquiry into the Wokingham District Local Plan as an objection —housing site (ref: WK11/19). The Inspector's report is awaited.

2. **Proposal** – The application is in outline with all matters reserved. It is for residential development and the plan submitted indicates 5 hectares of developable area. A range of dwelling sizes are proposed, ranging from 2 bedroomed to 5 bedroomed, with densities ranging from 30-50 dwellings per ha. The average density would be 40 dwellings per ha. which would result in 200 dwellings. The applicant also proposes to provide 35 dwellings for key workers. A transport assessment has also been submitted with the application based on 250 dwellings.

3. **Consultations** -
   - ***Highway Authority :*** Recommend refusal on grounds of insufficient capacity of distributor road network during peak hours to accommodate additional traffic generated by proposal and that the applicant has not adequately demonstrated that the travel demand generated by the proposal could be accommodated by modes other than the private car.
   - ***Landscape Architect :*** Strong objection as the site is a greenfield site within a countryside setting and a green gap/wedge. The site is considered to be an essential part of the landscape character of the area and therefore the application should be refused. The illustrative layout of the proposals shows the majority of hedgerows to be retained, although there are two that will clearly need to be removed.
     As this is agricultural land The Hedgerow Regulations apply. It will need to be determined whether these hedgerows are important under the regulations. An archaeological and ecological consultant will need to be commissioned to assess the hedgerows in relation to the specific criteria listed in the regulations in order to determine if the hedgerows are important. If the

hedgerows are not important the applicant does not need permission from WDC to remove them, however if it is considered important then it will become a material consideration in the determination of the planning application.

- ***Environmental Health :*** No Environmental Health objection although conditions recommended relating to landfill gas investigations, contaminated land assessment and remedial scheme if required and hours of construction.
- ***Minerals Officer :*** Proposal would not affect any mineral reserve with any likelihood of mineral extraction.
- ***Archaeological Officer :*** Archaeological evaluation requested.
- ***Environment Agency :*** Object as the proposed development would have a detrimental effect on the water environment of the site due to the loss of watercourses and associated habitat.
- ***Thames Valley Police Crime Prevention Design Adviser :*** No objection to the principle of residential development. Requests that any development brief and detailed planning submission be prepared in consultation with the Crime Prevention Design Adviser.
- ***CPRE :*** Proposal is contrary to local plan policies as the site is located in a rural area and gap. It would be inappropriate to give permission for such development before the Urban Capacity Study is completed. It would also have serious traffic implications.
- ***Wokingham Town Council :*** Refer to attached.
- ***Barkham Parish Council :*** Refer to attached.
- ***The Wokingham Society :*** Object to application. Overriding concern is impact on traffic in Barkham Road. It would result in loss of green area, impact on rural character of area, lack of public transport close to site, increased traffic, impact on flora and fauna, impact on infrastructure and lack of green traffic plan.
- ***Letters of representation :*** A total of 536 letters of objection have been received. These can be summarised as follows:

  - Congestion, on all roads around the area, traffic jams at peak times
  - Pollution created by extra traffic
  - Over development of existing 'unspoiled' areas
  - Should use brown field sites for development
  - Quality of life, increased pollution
  - Safety at the exit from Blagrove Lane
  - Increased danger to cyclists and pedestrians in the area
  - Lack of infrastructure to handle increased traffic
  - Insufficient amenities for further housing
  - Destruction of natural habitats
  - Damage to the countryside
  - Need the introduction of an improved road plan in the town centre before any such development
  - Widening of Blagrove Lane and addition of a roundabout to handle traffic
  - Wokingham is already overcrowded
  - Local infrastructure is not increasing at the same speed as population
  - Proposals of traffic lights to combat congestion are inadequate
  - Developments of the cycle way and emergency link will lead to the removal of a children's play area
  - Inappropriate use of greenbelt
  - Need additional schools, hospitals, etc.

- Local roads are not suitable for the upgrades required by a development like this
- More development could increase the flooding problems in the area
- Safety of the blind dog trainers in the area
- Development contradicts the Wokingham Council Environmental policy
- Safety on Oaklands Drive
- Desecration of this area of outstanding natural beauty
- Pressure on parking in the town centre
- Effect of site traffic on the local roads
- Effect on water pressure
- Loss of Saxon sites
- Pressure on the drainage system
- Lack of schooling capacity
- If approved it will pave the way for other developments
- Single track roads are not suitable for the heavy traffic use they receive
- Not enough public transport to cope with this development
- Safety to horse riders in the area
- Increase of railway parking pressure
- Turning of Reeves Way into a through road
- Dole Lane being used as a through road
- Increased noise in the area
- Increased dangers on local roads
- Difficulty of travelling into Wokingham
- The application is outside the settlement area
- Protected species live on the site
- Detrimental effect on listed building
- What will happen to the blind dog property?
- Safety of children in the area
- Violates draft deposit plan
- No green traffic plan submitted
- If permission is given the infrastructure should be suitably improved
- Development is on an archaeological site
- Loss of housing value
- Impact on Wokingham town centre
- Contravenes government policy
- Erosion of the quality in Wokingham due to constant building
- Not suitable for key worker development, due to lack of proximity of public transport
- Loss of light and privacy on existing property
- Health of pedestrians
- Objections to Blagrove Lane being one way
- Loss of wildlife in the area
- Inaccuracies on the maps supplied in the application
- Application is contrary to south-east local plan
- Lack of rail infrastructure
- The effect on trees with TPO's
- Increased pressure on local doctors

In addition, two letters of support have been received.

4. **Appraisal** – Main issues are:

   A. Principle of development in this location: (PPG1, PPG3 and PPG7; policies C2 and C6 of the Berkshire Structure Plan; policy STV2 of the South East Area Local Plan; and policies WCC1 and WCC2 of the Deposit Draft Wokingham District Local Plan).

   B. Local Plan process and housing land supply: (PPG1, PPG3 and PPG12; policy H2 of the Berkshire Structure Plan).

   C. Impact of proposal on visual amenity and rural character of area: (policies C2 and C6 of the Berkshire Structure Plan; policy STV2 of the South East Area Local Plan; policies WCC1 and WCC2 of the Deposit Draft Wokingham District Local Plan).

   D. Services, amenities and infrastructure provision: (policy LD6 of the Berkshire Structure Plan; policy SPS1 of the South East Area Local Plan; policies WOS4, WR7 and WIC12A of the Deposit Draft Wokingham District Local Plan; and Supplementary Planning Guidance A9).

   E. Location of development: (PPG13, policy LD5 of the Berkshire Structure Plan; and WOS1 and WT1 of the Deposit Draft Wokingham District Local Plan).

   F. Mix of dwellings: (policy H9 of the Berkshire Structure Plan; policy SH8 of the South East Area Local Plan; and policy WH6 of the Deposit Draft Wokingham District Local Plan.

   G. Housing density: (PPG3 and density policy in Deposit Draft Wokingham District Local Plan).

   H. Highway issues: (policy LD5 of the Berkshire Structure Plan; and policy WT7 of the Deposit Draft Wokingham District Local Plan).

   I. Archaeological issues: (PPG16; policy EN6 of the Berkshire Structure Plan; policy SPS5 of the South East Area Local Plan; and policy WHE16B of the Deposit Draft Wokingham District Local Plan).

   J. Ecological issues: (policy WIC18 of the Deposit Draft Wokingham District Local Plan).

   K. Concerns of Town Council and residents.

A. <u>Principle of development in this location</u>

The site is located within a rural area as defined by the South East Area Local Plan and the Wokingham District Local Plan and within a green gap/wedge as defined by the Wokingham District Local Plan where there is a strong presumption against development.

The character of the site is open countryside with some vegetation along the field boundaries. There is a group of low key buildings, stables and small

storage buildings to the north. To the east is public open space and again open fields to the west.

The applicant considers the site as an urban expansion representing a sustainable form of development. However, in terms of development plan policies the proposal does not fall within any of the exceptions referred to in policies C2 of the Berkshire Structure Plan, STV2 of the South East Area Local Plan and WCC1 of the Wokingham District Local Plan. The erection of a residential development of approximately 200 dwellings would clearly have an urbanising impact in this rural area, which is also important in providing a gap between built up areas. As such the proposal is considered contrary to policies C2 and C6 of the Berkshire Structure Plan; policy STV2 of the South East Area Local Plan; and to policies WCC1 and WCC2 of the Wokingham District Local Plan.

B. Local Plan process and housing land supply

The site has already been considered at the Local Plan Inquiry into the Wokingham District Local Plan as an objection – housing site (ref: WK11/19). Representations were made to the Inspector in September 2000 and the outcome of this part of the Local Plan Inquiry is expected in December 2001.

The applicant considers that there is insufficient land to meet the 5 year requirement and that the Urban Capacity Study, which is currently being undertaken by the Council, is unlikely to yield sufficient dwellings.

The site is a greenfield site which has not been put forward by the Council as a housing site as it is not considered to be appropriate. The site connects existing open space to the east, Viking Field and Leslie Sears Field, to the wider countryside to the west. It forms part of an important green wedge.

PPG3 "Housing" (issued March 2001) emphasises (at paragraph 30) the importance of the sequential approach to identifying sites for development, for inclusion in the local plan, looking at categories of sites in the following order.

- First, the re-use of previously-developed land and buildings within urban areas,
- Secondly, urban extensions,
- Thirdly, new development around nodes in good public transport corridors.

In July 2000, the Local Plan Inquiry (Part One) Inspector stated, in his report to the Council :

"I conclude that the Local Plan should not be adopted in its current form. An urban capacity study should be completed and the sequential approach followed to select the most sustainable locations for new housing." (Inspector's Report, 1.1.21, p. 8)

The Urban Capacity Study (UCS) referred to here, relates to the policy H3 Area of Search identified on the Structure Plan Key Diagram, the particular area of the District with which the Inspector was concerned.

However, in readiness for the receipt of the Inspector's report into objections made in respect of the remainder of the Local Plan, i.e. excluding Chapter 6, and to comply with the provisions of PPG3, the process is being applied throughout the whole of the District.

It is not possible at this time to predict the results of the Urban Capacity Study (which will not be available until later this year). It will prove useful in assessing sites for development in the context of PPG3. However, in the meantime, it would be premature to accord preference to a greenfield site, such as the application site, over the brownfield opportunities that the District affords.

C. Impact of proposal on visual amenity and rural character of the area

As already mentioned the character of the site is open, undeveloped and rural. It provides an important link between public open space to the east and the wider countryside to the west. The proposal is for a dense residential development which would have an urbanising impact on the area and would result in Leslie Sears Field and Viking Field being totally enclosed by housing or industrial development. The need to improve the surrounding highway infrastructure with footway provision and street lighting would compound these effects. It would result in the coalescence of built development adversely affecting the setting of this part of Wokingham, causing harm to the gap and green wedge function of this site.

In view of the above, the proposal would adversely affect the visual amenity and rural character of the area. As such it is contrary to policies C2 and C6 of the Berkshire Structure Plan; policy STV2 of the South East Area Local Plan and policy WCC1 of the Wokingham District Local Plan. It should be noted that since evidence was presented to the Local Plan Inquiry government guidance in PPG7 has been amended (26.3.2001) so that the loss of higher quality agricultural land, which forms approximately 60% of the application site, is no longer a stand-alone reason for refusal.

D. Services, amenities and infrastructure provision

Policy WOS4 of Wokingham District Local Plan states that development proposals will be expected to have some regard to existing levels of infrastructure, services and amenities. This is expanded upon in Supplementary Planning Guidance. All contributions need to meet the relevant test as laid down in Circular 1/97 'Planning Obligations' and be a consequence of the development and directly related to it.

Normally in developments of this size a minimum of 20% of dwellings should be social affordable housing. Whilst the applicant proposes to provide 17½% of dwellings for key workers, key workers are not clearly defined by the applicant and it is unlikely that this can be accepted in lieu of affordable housing. In addition no mechanism has been demonstrated by the applicant that the proposal would meet the housing needs of the District on a long term basis. These are not solely restricted to the needs of keyworkers.

Contributions would also be sought towards education, community and recreational facilities as well as highway infrastructure. These issues have not been discussed in detail with the applicant due to the unacceptable nature of the development in principle. However in the event of an appeal the applicant will be invited to discuss these issues in greater detail.

E. Location of development

Local Plan policies WOS1 and WT7 state that development should be located so as to minimise the need to travel by private car.

The Traffic Impact Assessment (TIA) does not properly identify how the travel demand arising from the proposed development could be accommodated by modes other than the private car. Although the TIA identifies the location of public transport/rail services and also the existing and propose pedestrian and cylceway network within the vicinity of the site, it does not demonstrate how the use of these could be encouraged. As a minimum requirement, pedestrians and cyclists should be able to access bus stops on Barkham Road, Molly Millars Lane and Finchampstead Road as well as Wokingham Town Centre and railway station, in safety and as easily as possible. Whilst these issues have been raised with the applicants transport consultant they have not been satisfactorily addressed.

F. Mix of dwellings

The Council's Housing Needs Survey has identified a need for smaller dwellings of 1, 2 or 3 bedrooms. A mix of dwellings is proposed although at this stage the exact mix is unclear. The Council would aim to achieve 45% of 2 bedroomed dwellings or less, 30% of 3 bedroomed dwellings and 25% with 4 bedrooms or more.

G. Housing Density

PPG3 and the Council's Density Policy recommend a minimum density of 30 dwellings per hectare which the proposed development would achieve. The density of development would be considerably higher than surrounding residential development to the north and south, thereby exacerbating the urbanising impact of the proposed development.

H. Highway issues

The Traffic Impact Assessment (TIA) submitted alongside the application has been based on a development comprising 250 dwellings and demonstrates that 206 and 213 movements would be generated during the am and pm peaks respectively. This traffic would be routed to the north of the site via Barkham Road as the applicant proposes to close Blagrove Lane to through traffic immediately south of the new access serving the development. Although the Highway Authority would not want to see any increase in traffic using the southern sections of Blagrove Lane due to its substandard nature, its closure to vehicular traffic would not be an option supported by the Authority.

The applicant also proposes to signalise the junction of Blagrove Lane/Barkham Road, primarily on highway safety grounds as visibility is substandard. This would offer no benefit to the capacity of the junction and would infact introduce further delays throughout the day, when the capacity problems are only confined to the morning peak period.

Barkham Road suffers severe congestion during the morning peak period, with queues extending from the junction with Molly Millars Lane as far back to Edneys Hill in Barkham. The additional 200 or so traffic movements in the peak hours would exacerbate the congestion that already occurs and introduce further delays and inconvenience.

I. Archaeological issues
Within the South East Area Local Plan no part of the site falls within an area of archaeological importance. However, in the Wokingham District Local Plan this designation has been extended and part of the site is within an archaeological site.

The Archaeologist has requested an evaluation and the applicant is aware of this requirement.

J. Ecological Issues
One issue raised by residents is the need for an Environmental Impact Assessment. The type of development proposed does not fall within any of the categories in Schedule 2 of the Town & Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 1999 and whilst an application of this type on a greenfield site would have an impact on the ecology of the area there is no formal requirement for an Environmental Impact Assessment.

The Environment Agency has also raised an objection as the development would have a detrimental impact on the water environment due to the loss of watercourses and associated habitat. In view of this the proposal is also considered contrary to policies SPS5 of the South East Area Local Plan and WIC18 of the Wokingham District Local Plan.

In addition, a hedgerow assessment has been requested, the outcome of which will be reported.

K. Concerns of Town Council and objectors
The concerns of objectors and Town Council have been noted. Issues of principle of development in this location, impact on rural character of area, infrastructure, traffic generation, need for Environmental Impact Assessment have been dealt with above.

5. **Conclusion** –The principle of development is not acceptable and the proposal by reason of its form, scale and location would have an urbanising impact causing unacceptable harm to the open and rural character of the area, which is also designated as being a green gap. As such the proposal is considered contrary to Policies STV2 of the South East Area Local Plan; policies WCC1 and WCC2 of the Wokingham District Local Plan; and policies C2 and C6 of the Berkshire Structure Plan.

There are also concerns over capacity of the existing highway network, the applicant not addressing adequately the use of alternative modes of transport other than the private car, impact on the water environment, inadequate provision of affordable housing and impact on existing amenities, services and infrastructure.

6. **Recommendation** – REFUSE planning permission on the following grounds :

1. The proposed development by reason of its location would cause unacceptable harm to the open and rural character of the area, which is also designated as 'Green Gap'. As such the proposal is considered contrary to policies STV2 and SC1 of the South East Area Local Plan; policies WCC1 and WCC2 of the Wokingham District Local Plan (Deposit Draft); and policies C2 and C6 of the Berkshire Structure Plan.

2. The Distributor Road Network in the vicinity of the site has insufficient spare capacity during peak periods to accommodate the additional traffic that would be generated by this proposal. The proposal is therefore contrary to Berkshire Structure Plan policy LD5; Loddon Area Local Plan policy LT5; Wokingham District Local Plan (Deposit Draft) policy WOS3.

3. The applicant has not demonstrated to the satisfaction of the Local Planning Authority that the development accords with Berkshire Structure Plan policies OS1 and H4; Wokingham District Local Plan (Deposit Draft) policy WOS3, WT3 and PPG13, with regard to sustainability of the proposal.

4. The proposed development would have a detrimental impact on the water environment of site due to the loss of watercourses and associated habitat. As such the proposal is considered contrary to policies STV5 of the South East Area Local Plan and WIC18 of the Wokingham District Local Plan (Deposit Draft).

5. The proposed development does not include appropriate contributions to services and infrastructure needs which would result from the proposal. As such the proposal is considered contrary to policies LD5 of the Berkshire Structure Plan, SPS1 of the South East Area Local Plan and WOS4 of the Wokingham District Local Plan (Deposit Draft).

6. The proposal does not make adequate provision for affordable housing in accordance with policies SH8 of South East Area Local Plan, WH7 of the Wokingham District Local Plan (Deposit Draft) and PPG3.

7. Approval of the application would be likely to create an unacceptable precedent for further such developments in the 'Green Gap' which the Local Planning Authority would then find difficult to resist.

BASIA POLNIK