

What price localism when county council ignores concerns?



by **John Steele**
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AS THE Government tells us that local people should decide local priorities and particularly the location of new housing development, West Sussex County Council ploughs on with its ill-judged proposal to build on Horsham's Muggeridge Field.

Horsham District Council is opposed to the scheme, local residents are furious and the many people who have walked and enjoyed the field for years are up in arms. But is the county council listening? Not one bit. It's a long way from Chichester so why should they worry, or let facts get in the way of making a quick buck?

Muggeridge Field

is outside the built-up boundary of the town and lies between Athelstan Way and the Chesworth Farm country park. West Sussex bought the ten acres in 1973 for a school but it is no longer needed.

Meanwhile, although the field was supposedly let for grazing, the reality is that the lack of properly maintained fencing has allowed local people to use the area for informal

recreation and treat it as part of the adjoining Chesworth Farm.

Muggeridge Field even has its own mention in the HDC Chesworth Farm Management Plan which confirms its use for recreation and that HDC maintains it and gives it an annual cut for hay. So much for the county council's claims that the field is currently not used for leisure.

In February it applied for permission to build 70 homes and intends, if successful, to sell the land to a developer. Dozens of objections were lodged but HDC failed to decide the application within the statutory time limit and WSCC lodged an

appeal which will be heard by an independent inspector later this month.

Not content to let events take their course, the county council has now advertised its intention to redesignate the land from education to planning. This legal device is being exploited specifically to frustrate any existing covenants on the land or any claim by local people to have it registered as a town green.

In an attempt to find out whether there are covenants on the land we sent a Freedom of Information request to WSCC. It was refused on the grounds that the information can be obtained from the Land Registry. But there is

a fee for this. When we challenged the decision we were told the deeds had been checked.

Why, you might ask, couldn't they just have been photocopied and put in the post? The cost involved in writing letters of refusal must have been much greater than a stamp. This sheer bloody mindedness typifies the county council's approach.

And it's a mystery why we seem to have heard no public condemnation of the county's actions from our own county councillors. They should be fighting this tooth and nail.

It's not too late for the county to listen to local people, withdraw

its planning appeal and redesignate Muggeridge Field as open space.

But I wouldn't hold your breath because, as I say, we are a long way from Chichester.

We can only hope the planning inspector sees the weakness in the county's case.

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone, who shares these concerns. For more information, visit our website www.horshamsociety.org or telephone 01403 261640.