

Report to District Development Control Committee

Date of meeting: 17 January 2006

Subject: Blakes Golf Course, Epping Road, Bobbingworth – Planning application for health and leisure complex (EPF/1510/05)



**Epping Forest
District Council**

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This application has been called to committee at the request of Councillor John Knapman and is placed before the District Development Control Committee as the development has a potential impact on two parishes (Bobbingworth and North Weald) that are within different Area Plans Sub Committees. The site is within Bobbingworth but on the edge of the settlement of North Weald.

Recommendation:

The application is recommended for REFUSAL for the following reasons:

1. The site is within the Metropolitan Green Belt wherein only certain types of development are deemed appropriate. The proposed development is inappropriate and by definition harmful to the Green Belt. No very special circumstances, sufficient to overcome the harm to the Green Belt that would result from the development exist. The proposed building, extensive parking area and level of activity that would result from their use would have a significant and detrimental impact on the openness, character and amenity of the Green Belt. The proposal is therefore contrary to Government guidance and to Policy C2 of the Essex and Southend on Sea Replacement Structure Plan and Policies GB2 and GB3 of the adopted Local Plan.
2. The proposal would increase the use of an existing access off the A414 Epping Road. The A 414 in this location is a Primary One Strategic Route. The proposal would be accessed via the existing "temporary" golf course access off the A414 Epping Road. The "temporary" access does not meet the current highway design standards and specifications set by the Highway Authority. The proposal is therefore contrary to Policy T17 of the adopted Local Plan.
3. The proposal is in an unsustainable location therefore would lead to trips being made using the private car rather than more sustainable modes of transport such as public transport, cycling and walking, Contrary to policies CS1, CS4 and T3 of the Structure Plan.
4. The proposed building and car park, due to their size and design and their position within the open countryside/golf course landscape, present an unattractive and intrusive feature in the landscape, harmful to the visual

amenity of the area and contrary to policies LL2 DBE4 of the adopted Local Plan.

Description of Proposal:

1. The proposal is for the erection of a two storey building measuring 25.4m wide by 49.2m wide, brick built with a gently sloping slate roof and a ridge height of 7m comprising a 9m x 19m swimming pool, spa, sauna, gym, crèche area and changing rooms at lower ground floor with 4 studios, a salon, sales area and admin area within the roof. The building incorporates a single storey element to the side measuring 15m x 7m for storage in connection with the use. A car park for 250 cars is proposed, which is shown, (on an additional plan submitted after the original submission) to be set down 2m below the current ground level.
2. Access to the building is via the existing access road that leads from the A414 to the Golf Club House.

The Existing Site:

3. The red lined application site is just the area of the proposed leisure centre and car park and not the entire Blakes Golf Course site. This lies approximately 400m south of the A414 in the middle of the recently developed golf course and a similar distance from the existing golf clubhouse facility. The site is located on one of the most elevated areas of the golf course, part of which has been hard surfaced without consent. There is an existing hedgerow between the proposed site of the building and the proposed parking area. There are clear views from the site across the golf course to properties in the High Road North Weald.
4. Access to the site is via the Golf Course access road from the A414 opposite the Travel Lodge Hotel and Little Chef.

Relevant Planning Policies:

The Development plan comprises both the Essex Replacement Structure Plan 2001 and the Epping Forest District Local Plan 1998. Relevant policies include:

Structure plan

- CS1 Achieving Sustainable Urban Regeneration
- CS2 Protecting the Natural and Built Environment
- CS4 Sustainable New Development
- C1 General extent of the Green Belt
- C2 Development within the Metropolitan Green Belt
- NR1 landscape Conservation
- LRT1 Sports/Leisure Centres and Major Sports Stadia
- T3 Promoting Accessibility
- T6 Walking and Cycling
- T12 Vehicle parking

Local Plan

- GB1 Green Belt

GB2 Green Belt
GB3 Within the Green Belt the Council will not grant planning permission for indoor sports facilities and other large buildings intended primarily for leisure use.
GB18 Reuse and Development of the Former Radio Station at North Weald.
RST3 Public Rights of Way.
RST 20 Buildings Associated with Golf Courses
DBE1 Design of New Buildings
DBE4 Design in the Green Belt
LL2 Development in the Countryside
LL10, LL11 landscaping
T4 Cycling
T14 Car Parking
T17 Highway Issues

Representations:

Letters of representation in connection with the proposed development that have been received are summarised below:

MORETON, BOBBINGWORTH & THE KLAVERS PARISH COUNCIL – No objection.

NORTH WEALD BASSETT PARISH COUNCIL – Objection. Inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Members noted the Local Plan's direction for the leisure use of the former BT site as described by policy GB18. The proposed large car park represented over development and indicated that the use of the site would generate sizeable new vehicle movements which would create considerable highways concern for the junction of the facility with the A414.

The RAMBLERS ASSOCIATION – object on Green Belt grounds, and proliferation of buildings on the golf course. The buildings already erected are seen as essential for the running of the golf course, but a health and fitness centre is not.

CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT RURAL ESSEX - Object. Green Belt. Not a brown field site, Government guidance PPG2 and Local Policies restrict the building of large complexes in the Green Belt. Loss of visual amenity. The building will be visible from every direction.

NORTH WEALD BASSETT & DISTRICT RURAL PRESERVATION SOCIETY – Object. Whilst the originally approved golf course may be acceptable land use within the Green Belt the new proposal is certainly not.

264 HIGH ROAD, NORTH WEALD – Supposed to be golf course not a leisure complex. Seems to obliterate a public footpath which is against the law. The golf course has yet to be completed, and they have altered many aspects of the original plans. They have erected a cover walkway that is not on the plans, there are already drainage problems.

272 HIGH ROAD NORTH WEALD – The plans do not reflect the current layout of the course. The building seems to be sited on the public right of way. The building is 7m high and sited at the highest part of the site, even the basement will tower over the hedging. The car park is on high ground and is very visible from our aspect. It requires to be fully screened by trees, I note that the various plantations promised in the original design have never been planted. The land is Green Belt not brown belt

as suggested. Assurance is sought that the provision of the facilities will not compromise the Green Belt status of the land.

1 BASSETT FIELDS – Concerned about the eye sore that a 250 space car park would represent, to be sited on one of the highest parts of the course and will be clearly visible from all properties backing onto the course, suggest a better location could be found for it. If it can be assured that the car park will not be visible from the houses bordering the site then I have no objection. I would like assurance that permission would not affect the green belt status of the land, and that no rights of way will be built over.

MON ABRI, SKIPPS CORNER – Inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Conditions relating to landscaping, access, footpaths etc from the golf course application have not yet been fully complied with. One application should be completed before even considering the next.

248 HIGH ROAD, NORTH WEALD – Since the start of construction of the golf course there have been several changes of plans, not all with authorised planning permission. Original plans should have been complied with, tree and shrub planting around the perimeter has not taken place, so we have no privacy. Original plans should be completed before embarking on anything further.

2 BASSETTS FIELDS – Not against the application but concerned about the car parking which needs to be well screened from view, previously hedging has been removed, if additional planting takes place this will enhance the overall look of the site. 250 cars need to be well shielded from view in this green site.

5 BASSETT FIELDS (2 letters) - The development will need substantial patronage to generate a return on the investment, as illustrated by the vastness of the proposed car park, however this is a major factor against the proposal. Concerned about the increase in traffic and turning movements on the 414, likely to result in increased accident risk. The scale of the development and car parking will have serious environmental implications in a green belt area. The hardstanding will direct contaminated water via drains in to the natural causeways which will have long-term implications. Additionally to construct below ground as [proposed 2,250 cubic metres of dug material would be displaced and would presumably need to be removed by conventional transport, which would see a return of the massive amount of commercial traffic to the area during the development phase. The proposal will be visually intrusive in an area completely free from any other building or structure. Other local leisure facilities are struggling and I do not understand how this development will be economically viable, given its rural location isolated from any residential or commercial activity. Approval would set a dangerous precedent for further development of the golf course in the future. I fail to see how they can claim support from local villages. We and our neighbours were not notified or contacted by the developers prior to the submission of the application. The proposal is not fitting for its purpose nor the community which is intended to serve and could open a "floodgate for full scale urbanisation.

OAK LODGE, HIGH ROAD – Oppose. Despite what the applicants' appraisal states, we as local residents have not been sent any details of the development proposals by the developers. There are enough health and leisure facilities in the area and surrounding areas, Ongar, Epping, Loughton and Harlow leisure centres and North Weald Golf Club offer health and fitness facilities, plus various keep fit and activity groups in village halls, day centres and community centres. The building, even if half underground will still be visible and an eyesore, the clubhouse is already a blot on

the landscape. It is stated that the village will receive special offers for the facilities, the same was said about the golf course, we (who back on to the course) have never been offered any membership discounts, although we had heard that we would receive free membership. This is obviously a ploy to get residents on their side. The business needs to make money how can they offer discounts to all the villages mentioned? How long would the discounts run for and how much would they be, and how long will free transport be provided. We think this is a ruse to get residents, schools, businesses and anyone else to believe that this will be good for them and the area. We feel we should be supporting the council run facilities that are already up and running, or they may close down. Concerned that the land is already Brown land and not Green Belt. They have a foot in the door and will continue to develop until its all Brown. What next a covered golf range with flood lighting? We should be preserving the Green Belt. The countryside should be preserved not developed. If approved it would open the floodgates to further proposals.

NORTH WEALD HEALTH AND LEISURE CLUB – Object. .Development of such a large building on green belt land is not needed as current health and fitness provision is sufficient and already support the local community. Concern about traffic on the A414. Accident blackspot and this proposal will increase the current problem to a dangerous level. The membership price of this calibre and size of health facility is likely to be prohibitive to most members of the community. Why are we giving up our green belt for people outside our community and increasing our local road usage? What would the opening hours be? This is a major factor in traffic movement and car parking. On the basis of the proposed building I envisage the Membership needed by them would be around 4000 thus creating a daily movement of a minimum of 400 cars a day. Why are we encouraging an increase in vehicles which is the opposite of the government directive to use public transport (of which there is none) and to increase carbon omissions which pollutes the environment.

In support of their application the applicant has submitted the following:

A PETITION SIGNED BY 9 RESIDENTS FROM NUMBERS: 3,4,5,6,7,8,9,11 and 12 MARCONI BUNGALOWS, which states; As residents who directly overlook the golf course, we have no objections to the proposal and look forward to enjoying the much-needed facilities that will be provided.

Additionally in support of their application the applicant has submitted letters from **SHELLEY PRIMARY SCHOOL, MORETON, C E PRIMARY SCHOOL and St ANDREWS PRIMARY SCHOOL,** each of which express support for the proposals and look forward to the opportunity for use of the facilities of the health club by their pupils., as there is a lack of suitable facilities in the area. These letters to the applicant are in response to a letter offering regular use of the leisure centre facilities and golf practice facilities free of charge.

HANOVER HOUSING ASSOCIATION – Thank you for your very kind offer of the use of your facilities in the proposed Health and Fitness Centre. There is currently a lack of suitable local venues accessible by the residents at Wheelers Farm Gardens, for them to use to keep fit and healthy, as some of them have mobility problems. With you being just down the road, you are in a perfect position.

BOYTON CONSULTANCY LTD. 4 MARCONI BUNGALOWS – No objection, fully support the application. The proposal will provide facilities within the village that are currently not provided and are long overdue. As a local business with neighbourhood interests we feel that this is an ideal opportunity to provide leisure facilities that will have minimal visual impact on the surrounding area. As a family with leisure

interests we feel that the swimming and tennis amenities would be warmly welcomed.

Issues and Considerations:

The main issues relevant to the determination of the application are:

Green Belt/Very Special Circumstances.
Sustainability
Visual Impact and Landscaping
Highway and Traffic Implications

Green Belt

The site is within the Metropolitan Green Belt, on an exposed and visually prominent site and separated from any other built development. The proposed development is clearly not appropriate in the Green Belt, (unlike the existing golf club development that as a small scale facility for open air recreation was accepted as appropriate) the proposal is therefore contrary to Policy C2 of the Structure plan and GB2 and GB3 of the adopted Local Plan unless the applicants can demonstrate “very special circumstances” sufficient to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt that will result.

Very Special Circumstances

The applicants agent submitted with the application an appraisal that suggests that there is a need for facilities of this kind in the locality and that the villages of North Weald, Moreton, Bobbingworth, Abridge, Tylers Green, Coopersale, Toot Hill, Hastingwood, Lambourne End, Bovinger and Greensted will receive special offers on the proposed facilities. The developing company is offering off peak swimming lessons to youngsters and keep fit sessions to over 50's with courtesy transport to and from the villages. They are also offering free use of the facilities at certain times to local schools. The appraisal states that the charges to non-members would be free or no more than that charged by Epping Council, or any other council-owned centre.

The appraisal suggests that the special circumstances are:

The vehicle parking accords with current the maximum standards.

The golf course is already developed and could be considered brown land.

The development is needed to progress the development of the Golf Course as a family club encouraging Women and children to participate in healthy activities.

The proposal is in line with Central Government directive in the fight against obesity and other forms of ill health.

To comply with these directives the majority of facilities will have to be incorporated in Green Belt areas.

Whilst it is accepted that the provision of swimming and sporting facilities that are available to all is in itself a good thing, none of the circumstances put forward explain why this site is different from any other within the Green Belt. The fact that the site is already a golf course does not free it from Green Belt restrictions. Policy RST20 of the Local Plan reiterates that any new buildings associated with golf courses should be essential for the functioning of the golf course, this is clearly not the case in this instance. The circumstances put forward could be argued by almost any leisure developer on almost any site within the Green Belt, they are not therefore “Very Special” and to grant consent in the absence of such circumstances would set a very

dangerous precedent. The development is inappropriate and by definition harmful to the green belt and there are no very special circumstances sufficient to outweigh this harm.

Sustainability

The proposed development is in a relatively isolated location outside the village of North Weald and is not a logical location for a facility of this kind, and will be poorly served by public transport. Most people utilising the facility will need to travel by car. This is contrary to the intentions of the sustainability policies of the current Structure plan which seeks to direct new development to urban areas and areas with good public transport links.

Visual Amenity and Landscaping

The proposed development is located in an elevated location in the middle of the golf course, the appraisal suggests that the building and the car park will be set below the current ground level to minimise the visual impact, and the ridge height of the building has been kept low again to minimise visual impact. It is accepted that with significant earthworks and landscaping the development may be less intrusive than appears from the plans when viewed from certain areas, such as from the A414, but the fact remains that the proposal still introduces a very large building and a very significant area of car parking into an otherwise un built up area. There will inevitably be a need for lighting within the car park and the entrance to the building, which will be clearly visible from the backs of houses in the High Road North Weald.

With regard to the design of the proposal the large floor plan and slack pitched roof proposed, while limiting the visual impact results in a design that is of little architectural merit and does not comply with policy DBE4 of the Local Plan which seeks traditional plan form and detailing.

Whilst a secure material store has previously been approved in this site for this site under EPF/2238/03 that was a far smaller building of only 150sq m floorspace, compared to that now proposed which has a footprint of about 1400 sq m, which it was argued was necessary for the running of the golf course, and it was a simple agricultural style building.

Highway and Traffic Implications

The proposal seeks to utilise the existing access to the golf course, off the A414 opposite the Travel Lodge and Little Chef. This access was a “temporary access” and does not meet the standards required by Essex County Council Highways section, it has not been upgraded as was required when planning consent was granted for the Golf Course. This matter is currently under investigation by Planning Enforcement. The proposal will result in a significant increase in the use of this unsuitable access off a Priority One Strategic Route.

The Highway Authority has therefore objected to the proposal.

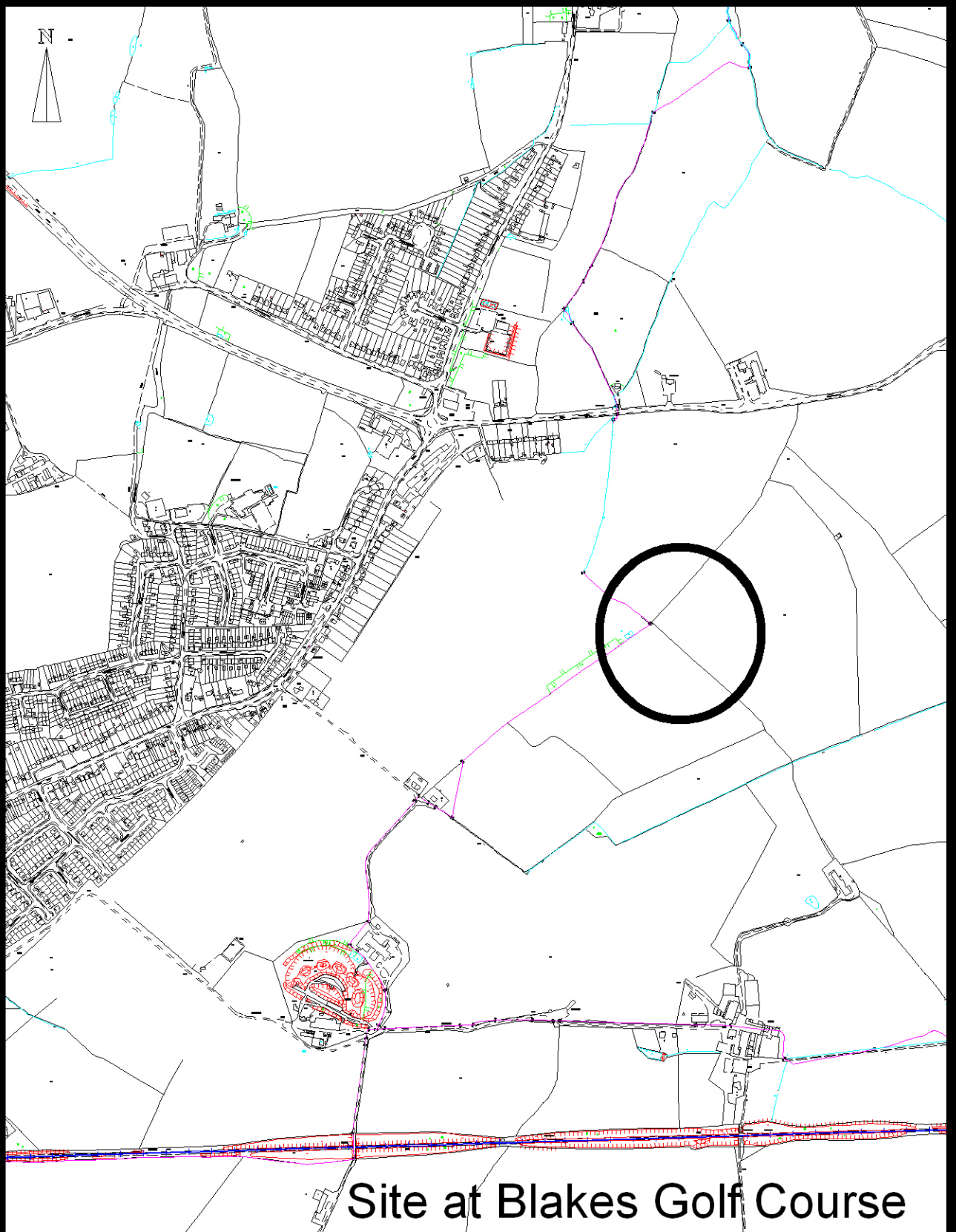
Other Issues

Various objectors to the scheme have raised concern that the landscaping promised in connection with the Golf Course have not been fully implemented, this again is a matter that is being investigated but it can not influence the decision on this current application which must be considered on its merits.

Concern has also been raised that the proposal will obstruct a public right of way, the submitted plan is not entirely clear, the initial drawing does not accurately show the Right of way and it is likely that the corner of the leisure centre proposed clips the right of way, which would clearly be unacceptable. The later submitted additional plan however indicates that the public footpath runs to the north of the leisure centre. The positioning of the centre in accordance with the additional plan could be conditioned should the application be approved.

Conclusions

In conclusion the proposed development is inappropriate development harmful to the openness of the green belt and to the character and visual amenity of the area. No very special circumstances sufficient to outweigh this harm have been proven. The site is inappropriate and unsustainable and the current access to the site is inadequate to deal with the likely amount of traffic that will be generated. The proposal is therefore contrary to Government guidance, and the Development Plan



Site at Blakes Golf Course

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