

# The Friends of the Forster Country



'To preserve for all time the open green space north of Stevenage known as the Forster Country'

## TO ZAYD AL JAWAD SBC ASSISTANT DIRECTOR PLANNING & REGULATION COMMENTS ON PLANNING APPLICATIONS

### OBJECTIONS TO 22/00781/RMM - Country Park.

#### Introduction

Outline planning permission for the development of the land to the north of Stevenage was granted in 2020, following the adoption of the Stevenage Local Plan 2011-31 in 2019. This established the principle of development, the classification of development parcels (including parcel E within the St. Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area) and the provision of key amenities including the restoration of fields in the remainder of the conservation area variously referred to in the paperwork as "St Nicholas Meadows", "publicly accessible open space", "parkland", and in some cases a "Country Park".

According to the planning officer report to Planning and Development Committee of the 4<sup>th</sup> February 2020<sup>1</sup>, a masterplan was produced by the developer Bellway Miller *"in order to guide the location of the built development, whilst responding to the conservation area designation in the eastern part of the site. It is intended that the built development will be restricted to the western part of the site...."* It went on to state *"the application is supported by a masterplan and a series of parameter plans identifying design coding, building heights and showing the illustrative layout of the development, including how the development will impact on the St Nicholas and Rectory Lane Conservation Area."*

Section 7 of the February 2020 report considered, at length, the impact of the proposed development within the conservation area and on the settings of the grade 1 listed buildings – St Nicholas Church and Rooks Nest House.

The report acknowledged that the proposed development *"will cause harm to the character of the conservation area through the building on land within the area"*<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Historic England were of the view that the impact of the proposals would have a *"considerable, harmful impact upon the character, appearance and significance of the conservation area, to such an extent that it would either weaken or eradicate the ability to appreciate the listed buildings and conservation area within the setting"*.

By way of mitigation, Bellway Miller's masterplan and strategy for the open space in the conservation area focused heavily on the restoration of **St Nicholas Meadows** to *"its late-nineteenth-century landscape character"* with a *"new network of footpaths"* as the means of providing public access into the "existing footpath network and to Weston Road. It further proposed new hedgerows and species rich hay meadows with the intention of *"recreating something of the character of the area as it was known by Forster"*<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Planning and Development Committee – 4<sup>th</sup> February 2020 para 3.5

<sup>2</sup> Para 7.3.21

<sup>3</sup> Land North of Stevenage Environment Statement, Appendix 3.3 Principles for establishing St Nicholas Meadows – Woodhall Planning and Conservation December 2016

On the basis of the mitigations of harm arising from proposed meadow, the density and design of house building in parcel E, and the significant planting or trees around the new houses (to screen the conservation area from them) and analysis of a series of 'verified views' (which were relied upon to assess the efficacy and impact of the screening) the Council's Heritage Impact Assessment concluded that

*"the proposals to restore earlier landscape forms to the area north of the church will contribute positively to the setting of this listed building, rather than have any harmful effect on its significance. This point was considered in the local plan examination and accepted by the Inspector"<sup>4</sup>*

Furthermore, it argued

*"It is considered that the management of the remaining agricultural land within the conservation area and its restoration to a land form that reflects historic landscape patterns in the area offers a significant benefit to the setting of listed buildings and a contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area. The management of the remaining land in this way offers a significant contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area and will contribute significant benefits to the setting of St Nicholas' Church, Rooks Nest, Rooks Nest Farm and the Old Bury. The restoration of the landscape to a form that would be recognised by Forster, rather than its present appearance of large-scale, modern fields, offers a significant benefit to the character of the undesignated heritage asset of Forster Country."*

It was on this basis that out-line planning permission was granted.

## **New proposals included within the reserved matters application**

The proposals due to be considered under reserved matters are a significant departure from the original propositions set out in the outline permission.

In particular, there are a number of additions to the proposed development within the conservation area that were not included in the masterplan that formed the basis of the planning consent in 2020. These include but are not limited to:

- A 50-car carpark;
- a 'vandal proof' toilet block and storage building,
- an industrial electrical base unit,
- breaking-through of the tree screening for a vehicle access road to the car park, along with many attendant urban artefacts including: speed humps, steel height restriction gates and other 21st century obstructions.
- The creation of a 'landscaped mound' made from 25,000 cubic meters<sup>5</sup> of spoil accumulated during the construction of the 800 houses in the north west part of the conservation area.
- The development of a 2.5 kilometre 3.5-meter-wide orbital "open space multi-purpose path" made from "self-binding gravel" which to all intents and purposes is a road, intended to be used by maintenance and refuse trucks.
- An excessively urban approach to path layout, furniture, litter bins and benches that is not in line with national best practice in terms of inclusive access to rural spaces or the preservation of historically significant conservation areas.

In and of themselves, each of these new proposals create additional harms to the St. Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area and on the settings of the grade 1 listed buildings – St Nicholas Church and Rooks Nest House. It is our view that **due process has not been followed** in properly assessing both the need for these developments or the impact of their harm. **On this basis alone, the Planning and Development Committee should refuse consent and, in our view, be directed by planning officers to do so too.**

National best practice<sup>6</sup> also requires that an assessment of the *cumulative impact* of developments in sensitive areas is undertaken, understood and considered. Meaning a consideration of the extent to which further proposed

---

<sup>4</sup> February 2020 Planning and Development Committee report para 7.3.15

<sup>5</sup> Earth Works assessment produced by Odyssey on behalf of Bellway Miller Homes

<sup>6</sup> Historic England – Good Practice in Planning Advice Note 2: Managing Significance in Decision Taking paragraph 28

unsympathetic developments would exacerbate the existing loss of open country-side *and* the additional loss already agreed in the Outline Planning Permission. Namely the development of Parcel E.

This is an especially important consideration given that the in-perpetuity restoration of the St Nicholas Meadows on the remainder of the eastern portion of the site was the principle mitigation for the harm caused by the housing development in parcel E of the conservation area. A mitigation that the Council's planning team and Committee relied upon when making their considered, balanced and thoughtful judgement at Outline Planning stage, in 2020.

In simple terms, taken in the round the "significant harms" identified by Historic England in their initial assessment of the outline proposals for the development in parcel E, are no longer mitigated by the benefits of St Nicholas Meadow as set out in the original Bellway Miller Masterplan and Strategy. This is because the proposed Country Park itself includes a number of additional harms. Far from providing a mitigation, the reserved matters application makes the problem worse. **For this additional reason, the Planning and Development Committee should also refuse any further harmful development within the conservation area.**

Alternatively, they could consider revocation or modification of consents given in relation to Parcel E so that the cumulative impact is maintained or minimised.

The following sections set out our objections in detail.

## **New car park and amenity facility within the conservation area**

The reserved matters application includes proposals to build within the St. Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area

- a 50-car carpark (with just 4 disabled bays);
- a 'vandal proof' toilet block and storage building, and
- an industrial electrical base unit,

It also includes a proposal to 'break-through' the tree screening (proposed at outline planning as a means of obscuring and mitigating the impact of the housing on significant views across the conservation area) to allow for a vehicle access road to the car park, along with many attendant urban artefacts including: speed humps, steel height restriction gates and other 21st century obstructions.<sup>7</sup>

None of these proposals were included in the Masterplan put forward by Bellway Miller for consideration at Outline Planning. Nor were they included in their public consultation material in the months and years preceding their application.

---

<sup>7</sup> Bellway Miller Planning Statement Land North of Stevenage Reserved Matters Application: Country Park

Figure 1: Original Master Plan





Figure 3: Reserved Matters Detailed Drawing



**Need for a car park has not been established or subject to proper scrutiny**

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (paragraph 132) requires planning authorities to place 'great weight' on the conservation of designated heritage assets. It also recognises that their significance can be harmed by development within their setting. It goes on to say that 'any harm or loss should require a 'clear and convincing justification'.

The Local Plan Policy NH8: North Stevenage Country Park, envisaged at paragraph 14.54 “**small scale** developments which facilitate public access and use of this land, whilst respecting the purposes of Green Belt and the need to maintain and enhance the conservation area will be supported”.

It cannot be inferred from this statement that its intended meaning was a 50-space asphalt car park and vandal proof toilet block built within the conservation area. Moreover, neither of these proposals could reasonably be described as ‘small’.

Furthermore, the Active Travel Plan/Framework Travel Plan that accompanied the Outline Planning Application did not reference the need for a 50-car car park. Indeed, the principle objective of the plan was to<sup>8</sup>:

- Reduce the level of car traffic generated by the development;
- Provide a choice of travel modes for residents’, pupils, staff and visitors;
- Promote healthy lifestyles and sustainable, vibrant communities; and
- Encourage a permeable development which will promote walking and cycling trips on routes that are safe, logical, convenient and attractive.

Meanwhile, the Highways Technical Note that accompanies the reserved matters application makes no reference to the proposed car park either. In fact, it states that the provision of parking within phase 1D of the residential development provides **40 spaces in excess of the ‘prescribed standard’**. It goes on to say at paragraph 4.1.7 “The proposed provision and allocation of parking is therefore considered to be suitable”. This is without counting the additional 50 spaces proposed in the car park.

#### **Grounds for refusal**

Due process requires that the Active Travel Plan/Framework Travel Plan be updated to incorporate the additional proposed car park and consequent vehicle journeys. In so doing, it needs to demonstrate that the 50-space car park is both required and is in line with the policy requirements for sustainable transport. Consultees on the reserve matters should be given the opportunity to review the amended plan. **Any decisions on the reserve matter application in advance of this would be premature.**

If a new Travel Plan is not produced, the Planning and Development Committee **should refuse the permission to build the car park.**

#### **Heritage impacts of the car park, vandal proof toilet block & storage building, the industrial electrical base, and the new vehicle access road, have not been assessed**

Putting aside whether the car park is indeed a necessary feature of the development (noting that this has not yet been established) it appears that the landscaping for the car park serves to screen it from the proposed new development, not the conservation area that includes Rooks Nest House from it. The proposed car park occupies a prominent position and will impact heavily on the conservation area. Any valid proposal would need to include measures to screen the car park, toilet block and other developments from the conservation area and the heritage buildings in particular. Given that this proposed development will impact on open views from across the conservation area, the design of the landscaping will of course need to be sensitive and as sympathetic as possible.

None of these visual impacts were considered in the Heritage Impact Assessment which was relied upon when Outline Consent was given. Indeed, the new developments render the existing ‘Verified Views’<sup>9</sup> that formed the back bone of that analysis, obsolete. Consequently, given the visual impact of the car park and other developments on the conservation area, new “Verified Views” should be provided. These ‘Verified Views’ should show the impact both in terms of the screening of the new developments (in summer and winter) and in terms of the impact on the open views that form an essential element of Forster Country, as seen from the conservation area and from Rooks Nest House and its grounds.

---

<sup>8</sup> WSP Framework Travel Plan para 3.1.1

<sup>9</sup> Land North of Stevenage: Visually Verified Views Montages October 2017 NPA 10651 Appendix 10.1

It is noted that Bellway Miller consider the existing Verified Views analysis to be sufficient and they have not be undertaken fresh analysis and have no plans to do so<sup>10</sup>. These are grounds enough for refusing the application.

Finally, it is noted that the Planning Statement for the reserved matters produced by Savills on behalf of Bellway Miller states that the additions of the car park, access road and toilet block were requested by Stevenage Borough Council as part of the section 106 and subsequent CIL negotiation<sup>11</sup>. These plans were further developed during a series of private meetings between council officials and the developers on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2021 and 12<sup>th</sup> January 2022. In attendance were the Green Spaces team, and 'drainage' advisors. It does not appear that the heritage team have been involved in the development or assessment of these reserved matters proposals. This is very concerning and calls into question whether the Council have been sufficiently fulsome and rigorous in their specification for the Country Park and their commitment to heritage and conservation matters.

### **Grounds for refusal**

Due process requires that the visual impact of the new car park, toilet block, electrical facility and access road are subject to a heritage assessment. Any such assessment would require the production of new 'Verified Views' to be undertaken. Bellway Miller have not developed new 'Verified Views' and have stated that they don't intend to do so. Consequently, it is not possible for the Planning and Development Committee to properly determine the extent of harm of these proposals either individually or cumulatively (alongside everything else). **On this basis the Committee should refuse permission.**

---

<sup>10</sup> Design and Access Statement Section 4. Country Park Proposals paragraph 4.11

<sup>11</sup> Planning Statement Land North Stevenage Country Park RMA Paragraphs 2.6 through to 2.9.



## AN ALTERNATIVE CONSIDERATION

In the spirit of progress, an alternative proposal would be to make better, more imaginative use of existing Council owned parking, toilet and storage facilities in the vicinity of St Nicholas Meadows.

The current proposed car park and toilet block negotiated through the CIL process will cost over half a million pounds to build. With sensitivity, imagination and clever design this money could be better spent making adaptations to the existing Council owned 40 space car-park on Weston Road. St Nicholas Church PCC have also made alternative suggestions in the past. We encourage the Council to be bold and consider the numerous alternatives to building on our precious rural heritage.

Figure 4 The new proposed car park and existing Council owned car park, toilet and storage area



## The creation of a ‘landscaped mound’ made from 25,000 cubic meters<sup>12</sup> of spoil accumulated during the construction of the 800 houses in the north west part of the conservation area.

The reserved matters application includes a proposal to utilise ‘surplus cut and fill material arising from the development’<sup>13</sup> and to dump it to a height of up to 1.75 meters with the effect of creating what the application refers to as a “landscaped mound” in the northern part of the conservation area next to Chesfield Park.

If agreed, this proposal will forever alter the topography of the landscape as it would have been known to EM Forester. It causes unnecessary harm to an area that is already beautifully contoured and one of the most attractive parts of the conservation area for no apparent benefit other than it makes lighter work for the developer.

<sup>12</sup> Earth Works assessment produced by Odyssey on behalf of Bellway Miller Homes

<sup>13</sup> Savilles Planning Statement Country Park para 3.5

Figure 5 contemporary images of the site for the proposed “landscaped mound”





Moreover, the creation of the mound during phase 1, 2a and 2b of the 'Country Park' will cause significant and unnecessary harm to the conservation area during the construction period for the best part of a decade. This creates significant harm and is a material consideration for the Planning and Development Committee in their determination

Figure 6 extract from Earth Works Assessment and

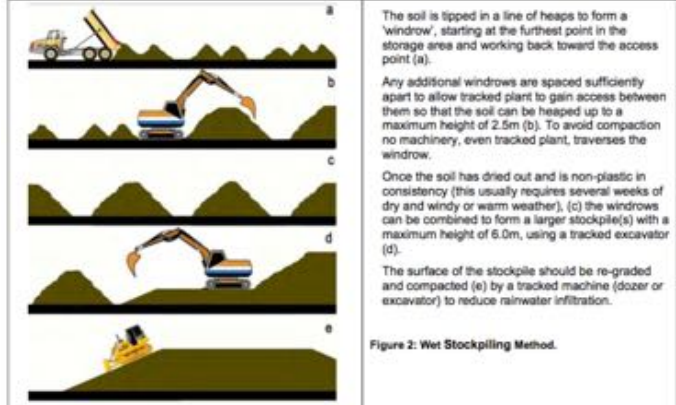
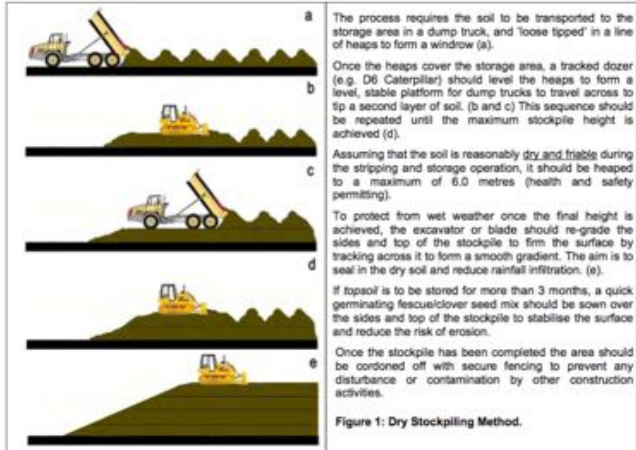
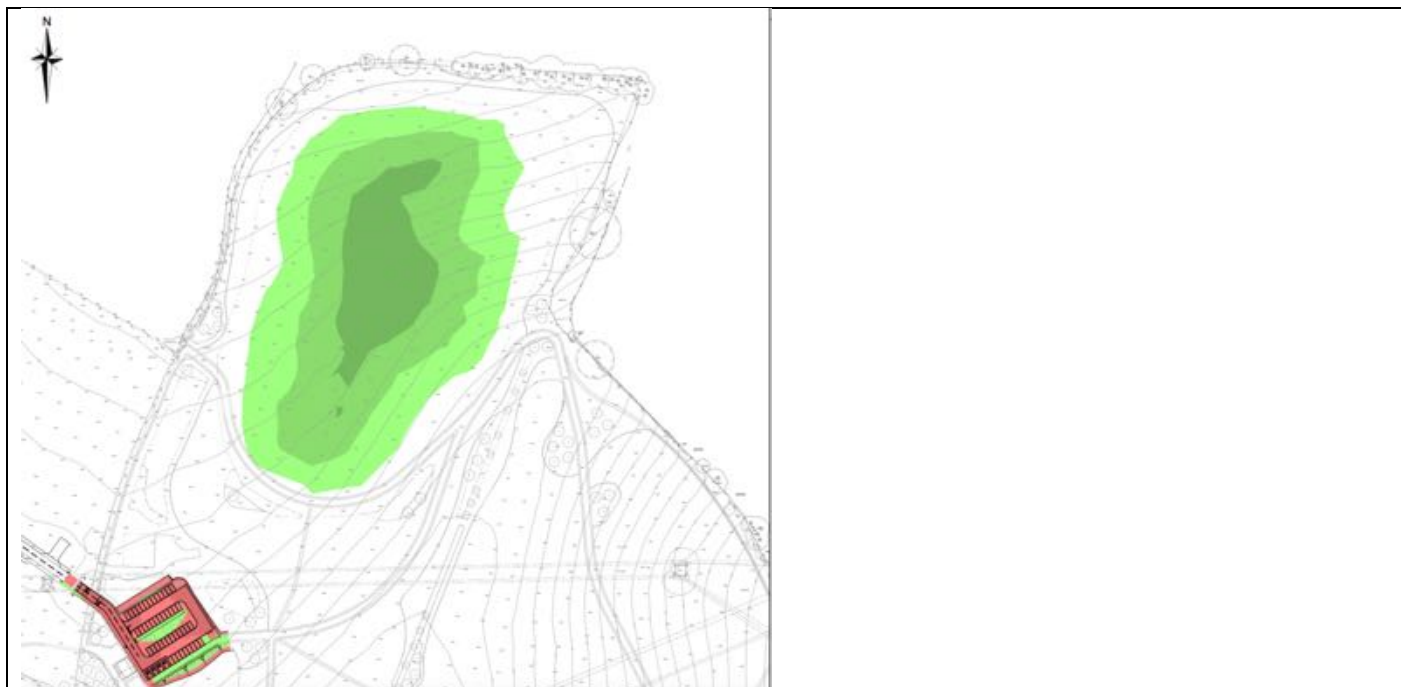


Plate 1: Wing-tined subsoiler



Plate 2: Tractor drawn subsoiler

6.11.4 For small and restricted access areas, a tracked excavator, fitted with a single tine ripper attachment (ripper tooth) shall be used to loosen the subsoil.



Plate 3: 360 with Single Rigid Tine Attachment



Plate 4: Single Rigid Tine working

## Grounds for refusal

As with other proposed new developments there has been no assessment of the heritage/conservation impact of the 'mound' or the extended impact of its construction. Nor is there any discernible benefit beyond reduced costs of waste disposal for the developer.

Consequently, it is not possible for the Planning and Development Committee to adequately determine whether this proposal is compliant with the St Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Areas Management Plan SPD or its wider obligations to protect heritage assets and their settings. Due process has not been followed and the proposal creates unnecessary harm for no benefit. **On this basis, the application should be refused**

**The development of a 2.5 kilometre 3.5-meter-wide orbital “open space multi-purpose path” made from “self-binding gravel” which to all intents and purposes is a road, intended to be used by maintenance and refuse trucks.**

**AND**

**An excessively urban approach to path layout, furniture, litter bins and benches that is not in line with national best practice in terms of inclusive access to rural spaces or the preservation of historically significant conservation areas.**

Friends of Forster Society have long campaigned for the land we love to be more accessible, inclusive and available for use by all. Indeed, for many years we have been a lone voice in this endeavour.

We would support and champion proposals that carefully balance the needs of all users, including those using wheelchairs, mobility scooters and pushchairs with the objective of preserving and restoring the very essence of why people want to visit the conservation area, and what Forster himself described as “one of the finest views in England” in the first place.

It is why, for all its flaws we took some solace from the fact that the outline planning permission included an undertaking to restore St Nicholas Meadows to a rural landscape the nature and character of which would have been recognised by EM Forster and other late 19<sup>th</sup> Century visitors.

Unfortunately, what is included in the reserved matters application does not live up to that promise. Instead there is an over designed and unnecessarily urban proposition that focuses too heavily on a municipal-parks led vision for the meadows rather than one that reclaims its rural heritage and charm. What is being proposed is not the rural landscape the Forster would have recognised.

The most concerning feature of the reserved matters plan is the inclusion of the a 2.5 kilometer 3.5 meter-wide orbital “open space multi-purpose path” made from “self-binding gravel”. To all intents and purposes this is a road, and certainly from a planning perspective is a permanent structure that should be considered as having the same impact on the conservation area as if it were an actual road. Indeed, Weston Road, within the northern part of the conservation area is itself barely 3.5 meters wide and in many places is narrower than that.

Although the reserved matters Design and Access strategy suggests that this “multi-purpose path” is designed for use by mobility impaired users (which we support) the accompanying Highways Technical Note 19-188 dated August 2022 states that the real reason for the 3.5 meter width is so that Council maintenance and refuse pick-up trucks up to 5 meters in length and 1.75 meters wide can drive around the Country Park to make repairs and empty litter bins. Why have the Council designed a park that is so cluttered with urban artefacts that all these van journeys are going to be necessary? With a less engineered and less urban design, the need for such wide paths could be avoided and the rural heritage of the meadow enhanced yet further.

With imagination the Council could create a stunning local heritage asset of national significance. And it could do so in a manner that significantly reduces the burden of traditional maintenance regimes *and* enhance access for all. The Charity Groundworks UK estimates that 97% of England's Wild Flower Meadows have been lost in recent years and that proposals to re-adopt less manicured meadows and open spaces should be encouraged. They also note that future and on-going maintenance regimes and costs are significantly lower meadows than they are for more traditional parks<sup>14</sup>.

The Planning and Development Committee are duty bound to determine whether the proposed Country Park complies with its own policy as set out in NH8 and with the relevant Conservation Area SPD. We do not believe they can reasonably make that determination, because as with other aspects of the reserved matters proposals, proper heritage assessments have not been undertaken – particularly in relation to the new proposed hard landscaping (the multi-purpose path/road) and particularly as those development impact on Rooks Nest House and its setting.

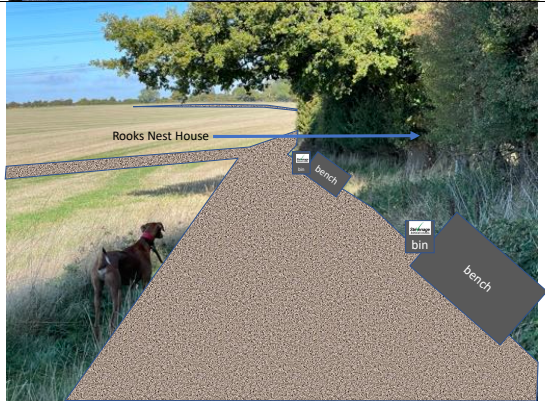
Figures 7 below reproduces the detailed proposals for the development of the 3.5 meter-wide multi-purpose path/road together with other installations (benches, bike racks etc.) and its juxtaposition with significant heritage assets. Implementing these proposals will have a permanent impact on the environment and character of the land immediately (a matter of feet) away from the Grade 1 listed Rooks Nest House and its grounds, and the Grade 2 list Rooks Nest Farm and Barns. There has been no heritage impact assessment of these proposals and seemingly no involvement of the Council's heritage teams in the development of them either, despite the fact that implementation will require excavation and land levelling and the removal of sections of ancient hedge-row.

Figure 7 extract from detailed reserve matter showing proximity of permanent hard development to Grade 1 listed Rooks Nest House and Grade 2 listed Rooks Nest Farm and Barns.



Figure 9 shows before and after impressions of what these permanent developments might mean – there is very clearly far too much hard infrastructure proposed and it should not be agreed.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/creating-a-wildflower-meadow-in-your-community/>



Rooks Nest House

Rooks Nest Farm and Barns



Rooks Nest House

Benches Bins and Bike Racks

Rooks Nest Farm and Barns



In developing these proposals, the developer and Council have not adopted national best practice guidance with regards balancing access and heritage conservation. There are two obvious tools that they could have used but have not. They are:

- **Historic England Technical Guidance: Easy Access to Historic Landscapes**<sup>15</sup> amongst other things this guidance sets out how stewards of historic landscapes can adopt access strategies that help them understand, balance and manage enhanced access alongside conservation objectives. Given that the Local Plan specifically references the need to follow Historic England best practice, is it disappointing that the developer and Council haven't done so.
- **Paths For All** (a charity established to improve access to parks and rural settings for people with disabilities) and their national guidance<sup>16</sup> "**Country Side for All – Good Practice Guide**". This guide, much like the English Heritage guide, sets out a process and method for land owners and stewards to consider what appropriate measures needed to be put in place to enable inclusive access to their land. Their guidance was developed in partnership with Arthritis Care, Disability Action, Radar, Mencap, the RNIB and the Scottish Disability Equality Forum. Their guidance recommends that in rural settings inclusive access for wheel chair and mobility impaired users can be achieved through the use of hard surface (but non-permanent) paths (compacted material) with a width of 1 to 1.2 meters. Their guidance also recommends seating places in a frequency 200-300 meters.

In short – good practice would suggest that a fully inclusive and accessible meadow could be achieved with a far less intrusive pattern and size of paths and with far less urban park clutter. The Council should go back to the drawing board and come forward with a more appropriate plan.

#### Grounds for refusal

As with other proposed new developments due process has not been followed with regards the proper assessment of the heritage/conservation impact of the proposed multi-use path, which from a planning perspective, should be considered as a "development". Nor has there been adequate assessment of the cumulative impact of other park infrastructure, particularly in close proximity of Rooks Nest House and Rooks Nest Farm and Barns. Best practice guidance has not been adopted and there appears to have been little or no involvement of heritage professionals in the development of the Country Park Plans.

Consequently, it is not possible for the Planning and Development Committee to adequately determine whether this proposal is compliant with the St Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Areas Management Plan SPD or with the intention of Local Plan policy NH8, and its wider obligations to protect heritage assets from harm. **On this basis, this aspect of the application should be refused**

These are initial comments from Friends of Forster Country. We continue to read through all the planning material and reserve the right to submit further comments in due course.

FoFC September 2022

---

<sup>15</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/easy-access-historic-landscapes/heag011-easy-access-to-historic-landscapes/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/mediaLibrary/other/english/countryside-for-all-guide.pdf>