

FITTLEWORTH COMMUNITY HUB PROJECT

HIGH TREES RESIDENTS' CONCERNS

Ian McTeer - Chair High Trees Management Company

As an estate of 12 houses whose western boundary borders the village playing fields and wooded area impacted by the proposed development of Fittleworth Village Hall, Social Club and Car Park, we have a number of significant concerns about the Community Hub Project.

We would like to emphasise that we are wholly in favour of a modernisation of the Social Club which is clearly in need of regeneration and urgent maintenance work. We are keen to engage with village groups to ensure the best outcome for Fittleworth and its facilities.

Although some of our concerns relate to the quality of life of those living within the immediate environs of the proposed development, many of the issues raised by High Trees residents have their basis in broader concerns which will also have implications for many others within the Fittleworth community.

1. ENVIRONMENTAL

The proposed development of the Village Hall Car Park, involves almost doubling its size with an additional 30 Spaces created by destruction of green space, and the felling of up to 12 oak trees.

This green space currently provides a natural habitat for birds, bats and wildlife as well as providing a natural screen between High Trees dwellings and the Village Hall Car Park. Crucially it also forms a natural soak-away absorbing run off from the existing car park. The culvert which runs along the eastern boundary of the village playing fields has often been overwhelmed in the past, causing local flooding.

West Sussex County Council were sufficiently concerned by this flooding that they have invested over £18000 in recent years to improve the current culvert and drainage infrastructure. Despite this, the culvert has only just maintained its integrity, particularly during the heavy rainfall seen during this past winter. Any increase in run off into the culvert, however small, and the loss of vital natural soak-away land, is likely to significantly increase the likelihood of future flooding. This will have potential implications both to local properties, and also to the main drainage stream running through Fittleworth. This larger stream also struggles during periods of prolonged wet weather and has the potential to cause further flooding downstream in lower parts of Fittleworth.

The destruction of woodland and green space within a National Park village with the intent of providing extra car parking seems wholly against the South Downs National Park's stated objectives to renature. Although planning permission was previously granted in 2001, we believe this was only for 8 additional cars and not the 30 now proposed. This permission also predates the formation of the South Downs National Park in 2010 with an associated change in planning policies, and a wholly new set of environmental standards and considerations.

2. NOISE AND ANTI SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

The current Sports and Social Club is widely recognised as being under utilised. However, during the summer and when the club has been used for private functions, anti social behaviour has been experienced by local residents, including items being thrown into gardens from the pathway behind properties and late night noise. As it currently stands, despite occasional nuisance, this does not present significant degradation in quality of life, primarily as the Social Club entrance opens away from residential areas but also because the events in question are not every weekend.

The proposed development of the Village Hall and Social Club includes a relocation of the main entrance to the rear of the building. This will mean anti social behaviour and noise are concentrated in the car park and immediately adjacent to neighbouring properties. With the layout of buildings in that area, noise will echo, rebound and channel directly into the back of High Trees properties. We are strongly opposed to this proposal which we feel has the potential to have overwhelming detrimental impact on High Trees residents quality of life.

The commercial ambitions of this project undoubtedly will require the hall, social club and bars to be in use every weekend, and as many other weekday nights as possible, in order to justify the substantial costs incurred. We feel the demand from within Fittleworth simply doesn't exist to create this level of utilisation, so the venue will need to actively seek and attract many of its clients from outside the village.

This will likely result in the import of a substantial increase in evening and weekend noise and anti social behaviour from outside the village. Fittleworth residents as a whole should be very alarmed at this prospect, especially since it potentially offers them very little in return for the sacrifice of quality of life. This will be an entirely new problem, needlessly imposed on Fittleworth residents purely to satisfy the running costs of what will be a regional venue.

3. TRAFFIC

The increase in traffic along School Lane cannot be mitigated by the road network, and this will have a significant impact on flows of traffic through the village, including additional risks to children at school pick up times. The increase in traffic volumes already caused by the Village Shop has been very noticeable, but the impact of further traffic during the day and most evenings will have an undoubted detrimental impact on the quality of life of village residents, increasing noise and hazards for pedestrians.

This inevitable increase in traffic is against the stated interests and objectives of the South Downs National Park to be a more environmentally conscious area.

4. FINANCIAL RISK

This is a big project, with big financial risks. The Social Club has been under utilised for many years and we believe has been supported by the Fittleworth Parish Council in order to continue to function.

A Community Hub project of this scale and ambition will very likely require full utilisation simply in order to cover its operating costs and justify this development. This clearly will increase noise, anti social behaviour and traffic as discussed above, but conversely also has the potential to expose the Parish Council and Fittleworth residents to considerable financial liabilities should the project prove less successful than hoped.

Given the difficulties faced by the hospitality sector in recent years, there are certainly no guarantees that the utilisation of this new facility will justify and cover the development and running costs involved and is possibly a very risky financial venture.

We would be keen to know how much has already been spent on architects, planning and consultants thus far, and what contingencies would be in place should the new building prove to be loss making. Additionally, who would cover any shortfall in running costs and would there be any liability for Fittleworth Council Tax payers?

5. VILLAGE SUPPORT

The recent update article in the Fittleworth Village Magazine, and the update given to the Parish Council Meeting on 18 March refer to overwhelming support for this project. Sadly, not everyone was able to attend the meeting in May 2023 and therefore unable to have an input on this debate. Additionally the opportunity to show support for the proposed development did not nuance reservations about scale or scope of the project and were not conducted by proper democratic means. We would be interested to hear the sample size of the survey, the question asked and the number of responses for and against.

Therefore mention of overwhelming support is perhaps misleading and should be avoided until a proper village consultation is carried out with all residents having the opportunity to vote on the matter with all facts and cases, both for and against, presented to them.

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

The Sports and Social Club is currently under utilised. There is plenty of space within the existing building layout for use for other purposes. With thoughtful modernisation, redecoration and repairs, this would leave a useful, flexible space which is likely to meet all current and future needs at a fraction of the cost involved in the Village Community Hub proposal, and with far less disruption for Fittleworth residents

This would mitigate many of the concerns highlighted above, whilst at the same time enhancing a facility which is a valuable asset which could be at the core of village life.

We would be keen to engage on planning for this smaller redevelopment and modernisation which we feel would more in keeping with the village and the core values of the South Downs National Park in which it lies.

Ian McTeer
On Behalf High Trees Residents
30 April 2024