

Save Esher Greenbelt and Esher Residents Association: Speech to Sandown Park Planning Inquiry

To introduce myself, my name is Linda Stotesbury, I've been a resident of Esher for nearly 10 years, and we live on Lower Green Road opposite Site 3. I'm a Chartered Surveyor, but I am speaking today as a resident, both on behalf of Save Esher Greenbelt and as a committee member of the Esher Residents Association. As such, I'm speaking for a large number of residents who strongly object to the Jockey Club's proposed scheme.

We have been campaigning for almost 2 years. Over 640 residents have signed our petition, 420 follow our facebook page, and 680 submitted letters of objection. The Jockey Club does NOT have the support of the local community. Indeed, of the 84 letters in support of the scheme, only 6 were from the local KT10 postcode.

I'd like to summarise some of the key reasons why we object.

Firstly, we entirely agree with the Council that it will have a significant negative impact on the Green Belt. It's hard to see how 4-6 storey buildings can have anything other than a detrimental effect on openness on these previously undeveloped or partially developed sites.

While the Jockey Club tries very hard to prevent the public from accessing their site, the racetrack is clearly visible as we travel the roads around it. The views, open spaces and trees are important to the local community and to the character of our town. Mr Steel has argued they will plant new trees to replace those that are lost. But chopping down mature trees and waiting 20 years for new ones to grow is not environmentally friendly and it will not visually mitigate the negative impact of this scheme for a very long time.

The Greenbelt is precious, it's a nation-wide asset. Elmbridge's greenbelt is the first to be reached as you drive out of London along the A3, it's the first line of defense against urban sprawl. Unsurprisingly then, the people of Elmbridge feel very protective over the greenbelt. In a recent consultation by the Council, 85% said they wanted to see no building on the greenbelt at all.

The Jockey Club seem to feel that because they are the Jockey Club they somehow meet the Very Special Circumstances argument. But, whether you believe horse racing is in the national interest as a sport or not, doing up a private companies' facilities does not, we believe, meet the definition of Very Special Circumstances.

If we must give a part up the Greenbelt, then let it be for genuinely special circumstances. For things that really benefit the local community, such as a school or much needed affordable housing. Not for facilitating days out at the races.

Of all the arguments I will make today, the one that makes residents most shocked is the approach to affordable housing. As we've heard, the Jockey Club propose just 20% affordable housing because of the cost of the stadium upgrade. The vast majority of the flats will therefore be expensive private apartments overlooking the racecourse.

This means that £36m which could and should have been spent on meeting policy compliant and desperately needed affordable housing is going to be used to upgrade a private stadium catering to

wealthy racegoers. That is not just wrong from a planning perspective but it is fundamentally morally wrong. Mr Steel is right that there are real pockets of deprivation in Elmbridge. But what is needed for these families is affordable homes, not discounted soft play.

It's also unclear how the Council can actually ensure the stadium upgrade is carried out. What is to stop the Jockey Club using the money at other racecourses instead? Elmbridge's greenbelt could end up funding Cheltenham's track.

The community benefit proposed by the Jockey Club is primarily to support their business on race days. From the residents I've spoken to, it is neither wanted nor needed by the local community. A nursery already exists on the site. Lower Green already has a playground. And there is a soft play centre already at Sandown Park. This is run by a local family and is well used and well liked. The owners tell me their business will be destroyed if the Jockey Club open their own competing soft play centre. How on earth does that benefit our local community? The Jockey Club argues the new facilities will benefit older as well as younger children. But I can tell you my 11 year old son will have little interest in a playground or the cycle track – when we go cycling we go for miles across the Esher Commons - he'd probably get round the racetrack in about 5 minutes!

At the public exhibition in December 2018 residents were told that 50% affordable housing would be provided and were NOT told that the site was in the greenbelt. They were also asked a series of questions, such as would you like to see a new playground? would you like to see the stadium improved? But the questions were disingenuous – they failed to say would you like to pay for this at the expense of the greenbelt or at the expense of affordable housing?

In the original planning officers report we believe officers gave far too much weight to 'improved racecourse facilities'.

We obtained our own Counsel's opinion from Richard Harwood QC, which I hope you'll have had the opportunity to read. His opinion is that the original Officers assessment was fundamentally flawed because:

- It failed to take account of the additional value of the new facilities
- It assumed the new works would not create any extra income
- It did not take account of future revenue from the hotel
- It assumed there was no income from the operation of Sandown to fund the works
- It took no account of any other income available to the Jockey Club

While I note that in his opening remarks Mr Steel stated the Jockey Club have a debt of £110m, he also stated that British Racing is a £1bn industry. As the largest commercial horse racing organisation in Britain, the Jockey Club must surely be a substantial beneficiary of this. In fact, they had an annual turnover of £214m and underlying profits of £48m in 2018. It seems implausible they can't find a way of paying for the upkeep of their own facilities. If I could quote from their 2019 Annual Review, they state *"we have been able to increase turnover by 68% in the last 10 years... We contributed £27m in prize money, double the contribution we could afford 10 years ago. Last year we spent just under £10m on capital projects on a range of facility improvements, examples include the Hatherleigh suite at Wincanton, the customer entrance at Warwick, the refurbishment of the 4th floor boxes at Cheltenham, and enhancements to the Princess Royal Stand roof at Aintree"*.

The point I would like to make is that when they say they only have a profit of £4.5m, this is AFTER they have spent underlying profits on prize money for wealthy horse owners and its AFTER they have spent money on capital improvements to their racecourses. Governed by Royal Charter the Jockey Club promises to reinvest every penny back into British Racing. It's not surprising therefore they are able to quote a very small net profit. In fact, to meet their objective of reinvesting every penny, presumably net profit should really be zero!

Of course, how they run their business and what they choose to spend their money on is absolutely up to them. We wouldn't presume to query how they choose to run their business. What we are saying is that having spent all their profits, they cannot then claim they haven't got any profits and so must sell off the Greenbelt to make some more.

I want to be really clear – we're not saying it wouldn't be lovely if the Jockey Club had a nice new high quality stadium – what we are saying is that we don't want to pay for it from Esher's greenbelt. If the Jockey Club can't afford it themselves, they must wait until such time as they can, just like any other business.

They threaten that if the scheme is not given consent, they will let Sandown decline. But they also say that Sandown is a nationally important sporting venue – is it really likely they will let it close? In fact, the Jockey Club were busy refurbishing the Grandstand View Suite at the exact same time as the planning committee meeting last year. If I can quote, *'as part of ongoing improvements to Sandown Park we are excited to announce two brand new luxury spaces, the Gallery Suite and 1875 lounge, unveiled in December 2019'*. Mr Gittus is going to tell the Inquiry that this was a 'stop gap' measure. But why create luxury facilities at all if you are then going to let the racecourse decline? It does not suggest they are unable to afford improvements when they are really needed.

If this scheme is consented the Jockey Club will be left with a much-enhanced stadium, a brand new high-quality hotel and a significantly increased revenue stream. Esher will be left with reduced and damaged greenbelt, a family centre we don't need, and just 64 affordable flats located on a congested and polluted high street. The balance is NOT in the community's favour.

As a local resident in Esher I also deplore the arguments regarding transport. Surrey CC is apparently accepting the notion that because the sites are spread around the racecourse there will be no effect on traffic congestion or air quality. This is clearly nonsense. Every apartment has been allocated a car space. Every resident will have a car. The majority of visitors to the hotel will also likely come by car.

Sending an extra 690 cars (displaced from the Portsmouth Rd car park by the new development) to the More Lane entrance where they will park at Site D will cause traffic chaos as well as visual harm. I would like to make the point that currently Site D is a grassy field and it is NOT used as a car park except on a few occasions during the year, such as a handful of the bigger race days, the 4 evening concerts in July and the VW festival. The only exception to this is the small amount of hardstanding used as parking for the golf course.

Under the new scheme Site D will become a car park for all events at Sandown – some 300 per year, with access solely from Lower Green Road or Esher Green. This is particularly dangerous at the Esher Green junction, where I have regularly witnessed accidents and at the single lane railway bridge on Lower Green Road, which cannot be widened. In the planning application they also talked about using

Esher high school as an overflow car park – if that is still intended, I do not see how it will be viable or safe given the number of midweek events held during school hours.

I drive these roads every day and it is busy, difficult and dangerous due to all the parked cars. It often takes over 15 minutes to drive my daughter just 1.5 miles from home to school. At school pick up time Lower Green Road and More Lane are completely impassable due to parked cars, which stop the school buses getting along the road. Recently, a school child was knocked off their bike in front of our house. Bring racegoers into this mix and, frankly, I fear for lives.

Air Pollution has also not been properly considered, particularly on the High Street and the Portsmouth road. If the Jockey Club genuinely felt that people would use the train and not drive, they should have put forward a car free development to minimise the impact on air quality. A mature tree can absorb 48 pounds of CO2 each year. Chopping down trees and replacing them with carparks robs us of the very oxygen we breath.

Trees also reduce flooding, which Lower Green Road is prone to. The new flats on Site 3 will be raised half a storey to protect them. What however will protect our existing homes from run off from the racecourse once the current woodland on site 3 becomes a car park?

Despite its huge size, the plans are indicative only. As it is an outline consent for all but track works, the impact on the character of the town cannot be properly assessed. But if consented, residents will not be able to object to the bulk and massing at a reserved matters stage, even if it has an adverse impact on the character of the area – which we firmly believe it will. There are no 4-6 storey blocks of flats of this magnitude anywhere else in Esher.

Over the last 10 years we have witnessed many large houses in Esher being pulled down to make way for 3 storey flats, such as those along More Lane, and I accept that increasing density on brownfield sites is often necessary to provide much needed homes. But I think you will find that the residents of Esher draw the line at giving up our greenbelt too.

There has been much discussion this week about the detrimental harm the scheme will cause. On a personal note I would like to tell the Inquiry that detrimental harm has already been caused. In the 2 years since we first learnt of these proposals, it has caused a huge amount of worry and stress, both to me and to many others. Some of those I've spoken to have been almost in tears.

In conclusion then, this scheme will cause a great deal of harm: Harm to the greenbelt, damage to the character of our town, increased traffic and congestion, and increased air pollution. It will fail to provide benefits which outweigh the damage caused. There is woefully insufficient affordable housing because of the expense of a private race facility. One which the vast majority of local residents will not benefit from or use, and which the Jockey club could and should pay for themselves.

This planning application is NOT compliant with planning policy. There are NO Very Special Circumstances. And we, the local community, believe our Councillors were entirely correct to refuse consent for this scheme.