

PRESS RELEASE – Wednesday 30 June 2021

£80m retirement complex gets green light in 'devastating' blow to Chilterns village

MP disagrees with planning inspector's decision

A Chilterns community has lost its bid to stop an £80 million retirement complex from being built in its cherished countryside.

The Sonning Common community raised around £11,500 through crowdfunding to fight an attempt by Inspired Villages and a local landowner to build the unwanted retirement complex in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) surrounding the village.

However, a Government-appointed planning inspector ruled on Monday (28 June) that the major development – comprising a 'village centre' and four apartment blocks of up to 11.2m high containing 133 new homes – should be built on the 4.5-hectare site on the Blounts Court Road.

The inspector's decision followed a 10-day planning inquiry which concluded on 12 May. It is contrary to the Sonning Common Neighbourhood Plan, endorsed by 94% of the residents who voted on it; the opinions of the local planning authority, the Chilterns Conservation Board and the area's MP John Howell who said:

"I am disappointed in the decision with which I do not agree. In particular, the Neighbourhood Plan should have been given greater weight in the decision and can still be taken into account where the district council's plan is considered to be out-of-date.

"The Sonning Common Neighbourhood Plan was an exemplary exercise in local democracy, community engagement and was fully supported by the whole community. The residents are right to feel disappointed in this outcome and the precedent it may set locally."

Sonning Common Parish Council led the opposition campaign to the proposal on behalf of its residents. Chairman Michael Cann said: "I am deeply concerned about the impact this development will have on our village infrastructure: impact on traffic, impact on healthcare and the impact of seven years of chaotic disruption caused by construction work near busy and dangerous roads which are already struggling to cope with existing traffic demand.

"I, along with the residents of Sonning Common, feel extremely let down by this decision by the inspector who handled the appeal and by South Oxfordshire District Council who provided the evidence. It is devastating to our community that our Neighbourhood Plan has not been fully considered. Our faith in the process has been seriously damaged by this decision which undermines our confidence in the planning system.

"The disregard the inspector shows for the AONB, describing the area as a 'brief transition and gateway between suburban environments', is a tragic statement given how much we cherish our local, rural setting. It also shows how little regard the inspector has given to our village community. Granting this development on the Chilterns AONB sets a further dangerous and concerning precedent for our village. This cannot and should not be acceptable to the people of Sonning Common."

FURTHER INFORMATION AND INTERVIEWS: Please contact Ros Varnes, Deputy Clerk, Sonning Common Parish Council. E: deputy.clerk@sonningcommonparishcouncil.gov.uk T: 0118 972 3616