

BETCHWORTH PARISH COUNCIL

We always hope that the underdog will win the day, preferably with a determined effort, punching beyond their weight, delivering a glorious and moral victory.

That was how we felt when we put forward our case opposing the opening up of a sand pit on the Common Field. I know from the hundreds of letters of opposition to this planning application and the nearly two thousand letters opposing the inclusion of the Common Field into SCC Mineral Plan, that we all had a clear mandate to vigorously oppose this development.

At the Planning and Regulatory Committee meeting on 19th December at County Hall, six people spoke (the maximum allowed by SCC) and raised a number of issues at the core of our objections. Councillor Helyn Clack made a very strong plea for this application to be treated as premature as it short circuited the ongoing (and very expensive) consultation process for the production of the new Mineral Plan. The Common Field, PMZ 55, is not a part of the present mineral plan and the new one is still two years away from completion.

Mrs G Hein of CPRE sought to bring home the proximity to and the visibility of The Common Field from the Surrey Hills Area of AONB and AOGLV, and to establish the scenic nature of this open area with the pathways linking across the area between The North Downs Way and the Greensand Way (two long distance national footpaths).

I explained that the village had lived in reasonable harmony with sand extraction for 60 years, but this application was totally different from any that have gone before and brought with it a human cost that far outweighed the benefits or targets achieved by distant government. I explained that the Village forms a crescent around the Common Field and that the only safe footway north south through the village was by means of the school path. I pointed out that the prevailing winds would carry any pollution and noise into the village and in particular Atkinson House. I also pointed out that the proposed bunds and stand off did not even meet the County engineers' requirements.

Miss Corky Gormley presented a passionate plea relating to skylarks. She explained that this year, twelve skylarks were recorded, indicating at least seven or eight breeding pairs and according to the BTO, this "suggests that there is a density of breeding skylarks in the Common Field".

Mr Jim Harvey expressed his personal concerns as a parent of children at the School over the possible effects of dust, not only of sand extraction, but from the infill material. He also pointed out the very close proximity of the nearest bund to the Nursery.

Mr Paul Tanner of CAMEL made several important technical arguments including the key fact that this is not simple an extension of the existing quarry but a new site.

However, these well presented arguments were ignored by the majority of the Planning Committee. One Councillor even argued that the Welsh had suffered in the past from mining pollution, so we have little to complain about! Another said "We have gravel pits why shouldn't you have sand pits." (We have sand pits). All those present were shocked by the irrelevant arguments and the many inaccuracies including the statement that no properties overlooked the Common Field. We had no right of reply to any of these statements, neither were we asked any questions.

The vote went against us. We were badly served by Councillors who failed in their duty of care towards the residents of Betchworth.

However we have not given up. The Parish Council, CAMEL and many Parishioners have written the Secretary of State requesting a Public Enquiry. So if we do live in a democracy then we will have a second chance to put forward our just arguments. Maybe a different, more open-minded group might actually listen.

A big thank you to all those who have written on this issue and in particular to those who supported us with your presence at the Planning meeting.

Ian Wilson Chairman Betchworth Parish Council