

Sonning can't cope with so many new homes

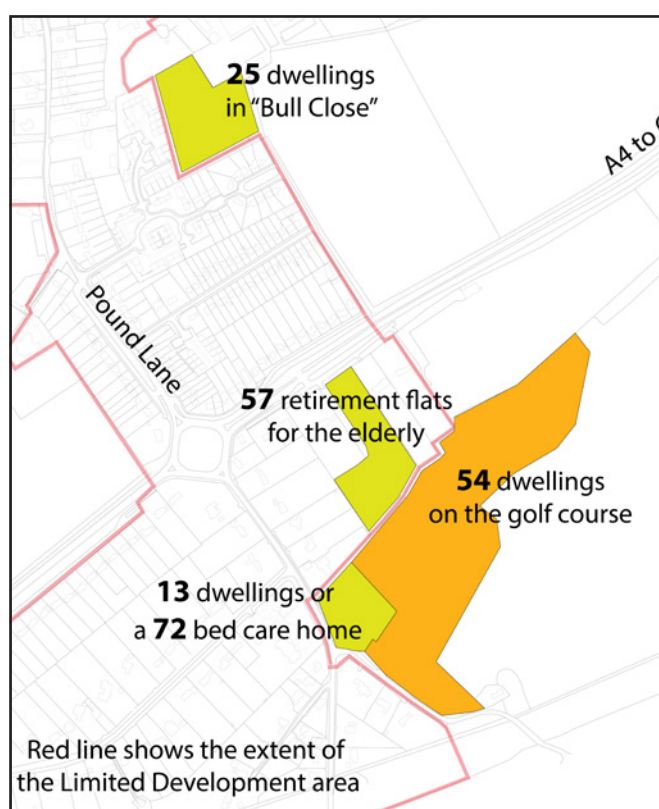
Mike Hart, Chairman

The owners of Sonning Golf Club have submitted an application to Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) to build 54 new homes on Sonning Golf Course (see plan on centre pages). Application No. 223458 was lodged on 19th November 2022 and comments can be submitted to WBC's planning portal up until 3rd January 2023.

Sonning's population is currently around 1,750 people living in 670 properties. **We are now facing an onslaught of new development that will increase this by more than 20%:**

- 57 apartments in Old Bath Road: this application was approved by WBC despite strong opposition by the Society (SSES) and Sonning Parish Council (SPC) amongst others.
- 13 dwellings on the Sonning Golf Club site behind the hoardings in Pound Lane at the junction with Duffield Road. An application for change of use to accommodate a 72-bed dementia care home has been turned down by WBC but is likely to go to appeal.
- An application to build another dementia care home next door following demolition of houses 101 and 101A in Pound Lane was submitted but turned down by WBC, it may well go to appeal.
- 25 dwellings on the site known as Bull Close bordered by Glebe Gardens, Garde Road and Sonning Farm.
- 54 dwellings on Sonning Golf Club, this current application No. 223458.

The first two developments above for 70 dwellings have been approved, the site adjacent to Glebe Gardens for another 25 dwellings is almost certain to go ahead.



Encroachment across the golf course would bring with it the consequential loss of green space, extensive urbanization and exacerbation of Sonning's already horrendous traffic problems. Imagine how Pound Lane and its junction with the A4 will cope in the rush hour! We just don't have the infrastructure for transport or utilities - remember the lack of water pressure and conversely the sewage issues we have suffered? And then there's doctors and schools....

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Surely this is more than Sonning's fair share of new development?

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If this goes ahead then it's only a matter of time until the Redingensians ground is developed (they've already drawn up the plans!) and the entire stretch to Charvil will become suburbia.

If you agree that this is too much development then please search for Planning Application 223458 on WBC's website (<https://planning.wokingham.gov.uk/FastWebPL/detail.asp?AltRef=223458>) and send your objections through the online comments portal, you will already find many objections from Sonning residents there. The Society, the Parish Council and the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group are submitting objections and we need your support to stop this threat to our village.

You can find out some of the grounds for objecting below, many of these were used by WBC themselves as grounds for refusing the very first application for the 13 houses on the golf course in 2016. However the developers went to appeal and were successful in getting the Planning Inspector to overturn the refusal purely on the basis that WBC had not met its 5 year housing delivery target. This very unfortunate decision has led to the current development creep which must be stopped before it gobbles up the whole golf course.

Threat to Sonning Village's "limited development" status

The approval of new housing development in Sonning Parish is the responsibility of Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) as the local planning authority. It manages this responsibility through delegated powers and produces a suite of documents that define how much new housing is to be built and where it is to be located.

Sonning and eight other villages including Charvil, Sindlesham and Finchampstead are locations where the Core Strategy states that only limited development is appropriate due to the limited range of facilities. Out of the 13,230 new dwellings that the Core Strategy envisaged being built in the entire borough between 2006 and 2026, only 100 were expected to be built amongst the nine "limited development" villages and none of the sites were intended to exceed 25 dwellings.

The Core Strategy is soon due to be updated but for now it is the key planning document that prevails and it is in this context that the current application for 54 new homes on Sonning Golf Course should be viewed. In planning terms it contravenes the following WBC policies:



CP1 Sustainable Development which states that "Planning permission will be granted for development proposals that 1) maintain or enhance the high quality of the environment". Clearly the proposed development of 54 new dwellings on open green space currently used for recreational purposes does by no means enhance the environment.

CP3 General Principles of Development which broadly states that planning permission will only be granted for proposals that are appropriate for the area and will not lead to a loss of facilities or infrastructure. The key aspects here are the sea change that this development would make to the present open green space and countryside character of the area, the absence of facilities that would contribute to the sustainable

normally be permitted" and it goes on to give few exceptions for rural enterprises but stipulates that it should not lead to excessive encroachment away from the original buildings.

Sonning Golf Course acts as a green corridor separating the village of Sonning from the neighbouring settlements of Woodley and Charvil. The net effect of building 54 dwellings on the golf course extending as far east as the RAMS rugby ground will destroy the green corridor and link Sonning to the neighbouring conurbations. As a result the proposed development is quite the reverse of the stated intent of this policy "to protect the separate identity of settlements and maintain the quality of the environment..." it contributes to the joining up of the settlements, it destroys existing recreational facilities and leads to excessive encroachment into the countryside.

CP17 – Housing Delivery states that a total of 100 new dwellings are expected to be built out of the total 13,230 over the period of the Core Strategy (2006 – 2026) in all the "limited development" villages, 50 of the 100 were expected to be built in the period 2021 – 2026 and crucially, it is stated that "Sites to be identified in Limited Development Locations where they should generally not exceed 25 dwellings." As summarized on the front page of this edition of *Bridge*, 95 dwellings are already planned for Sonning, this is the whole number envisaged in the Core Strategy for the 8 villages in total over the period 2006 – 2026, and now the current application is to add another 54 dwellings! How on earth can this be termed "limited development"?

In addition to policies in the Core Strategy, planning is also subject to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which sets out the government's planning policies for England and how (in paragraphs 98 and 99) "planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities" and "existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless.....the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location".

It is clear that the current development proposals are inconsistent with the NPPF guidance in respect of Open Spaces and Recreation.

There are many other grounds on which to oppose this application in addition to the planning policy contraventions listed above, we all suffer from the traffic problems in the village. Sonning Lane is gridlocked at peak times with cars queuing to get onto A4, in the opposite direction cars race to make up lost time when driving towards Woodley making it risky to join Pound Lane from West Drive, Mustard Lane and Duffield Road. Add the traffic from the Golf Course development and

possible care homes, it will be a nightmare! The developers say they have modelled the volume of traffic that would come from the 54 houses and join Pound Lane via the Duffield Road junction. I'll bet it wasn't modelled in rush hour.

Then there is the impact of the additional population on the already inadequate local facilities, where will the kids go to school as Sonning Junior School is already oversubscribed, where will they go to see the doctor with GP surgeries already overwhelmed, and will our Victorian sewerage network cope with the increased load?

Developers promise the moon when they apply for planning approvals but recent experience is that once they get approval they re-do the sums and find that they can no longer "afford" to build the affordable homes they have promised or to pay the CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) that is their obligation. Having approved the application on these undertakings, the local planning authority is loath to withdraw approval in the light of reduced contributions from the developer as they know that the developer will go to appeal and with deep pockets they usually win. The latest reports in the press about changes to the planning system which will remove mandatory building targets and replace them with advisory ones is welcome but we don't yet know if the changes will achieve the objectives of putting planning decisions back into local hands.

Our Neighbourhood Plan is progressing but it will be at least a year before it is in place so it won't help us combat the Golf Course proposal. If there was any prospect of having a 3rd Thames crossing there might be some chink of light but with South Oxfordshire steadfastly opposing it we can only expect the congestion in our streets to increase. And we are not alone, when the planned 200 home development on A4 at Bridge Farm, Twyford, is underway it will undoubtedly add many more vehicles to the queues over our historic bridge.

We must put a stop to this madness, please help by taking a stand against the proposed 54 homes on the golf course and add your objections to those already posted on WBC's Planning website.

The public consultation ends on 3rd January 2023. You can either go to WBC's Planning Website and search for Application No. 223458 to enter your comments or use this full web address: <https://planning.wokingham.gov.uk/FastWebPL/detail.asp?AltRef=223458>

The above web-link to the planning application as well as links to the NPPF and WBC's Core Policy documents are on the front page of our website: sonning.org.uk