

APPENDIX TP/SVAG1.4

GREAT LEIGHS RACECOURSE ESSEX

The recourse at was first granted planning permission on a former undeveloped showground in March 2003. The application was described as: -

'Erection of showground centre including fitness area, terracing for 7000 spectators, conference & multi-use areas; horse racing & equestrian tracks; stables & ancillary buildings; underpasses; lagoon; landscaping; replacement dwelling'.

The track was to be the first new racecourse built in Britain for 80 years. It is reported that the investment made by the landowners in developing the site was some £30M. However, shortly after opening to the public, the owner/operators were forced to place the business into administration (Jan 2009). Despite great hopes and anticipation from the race going public, attendance at the first few meetings fell short of expectations. The race goers that did attend were said to be disappointed with the lack of facilities. In the 4 years that followed the financial difficulties, the ownership has changed, but there has been little activity. The British Horseracing Authority has denied the new owners a racing licence, which is reported to be due to a lack of financial confidence in the business. With no licence there will be no racing in the foreseeable future and the stands, buildings and lighting columns, built in anticipation stand idle in the countryside, with the new owners exploring other development options for the site.

There are many parallels between this proposal and Horkesley Park. Both are in the open countryside and where access to public transport is limited. In the case of Great Leighs, the officer's report to the Planning Committee advised in relation to sustainability: -

'For a venue of this size and one which will attract the numbers of visitors envisaged the proposal is not located sustainably. It is not located within an urban area and there is not ready access to a choice of different modes of transport, such as a railway station. However, it is acknowledged to be a leisure use that cannot be readily located in an urban area and the site does have long established use rights. In this respect the negotiations have centred on minimising the impact on the number of car borne visitors and increasing the amount of other modes of transport. At the level of basic Heads of Terms they have been agreed with the applicant, but it is intended to refine them further. The principle issues relate to enhancing bus services to the site, providing linked entry and travel tickets and regular hopper bus services from Braintree and Chelmsford'.

The appellant at this appeal is making a similar case to overcome the lack of a sustainable location.

In relation to viability overall, it seems that there was not too much attention paid to this aspect of the racecourse proposals by the planning authority, the committee report advises: -

'The anticipated expenditure by sourcing of local suppliers would be in the region of £1.375 million per annum, salary bill of £3 million. Visitor expenditure based on the experience of the Essex Show would be £3.75 million per annum, £4 million in gate receipts, £5 million in trade stands, and £1.6 million on refreshments by race goers.

The question therefore arises as to how robust these claims may be from an economic development perspective. To this end it is considered appropriate to utilise the response and appraisal of Economic Development who advise.

'The Showground facility at Great Leighs is an asset to Chelmsford Borough, which draws visitors to the area and provides a direct and supply chain input into the success of the local economy. The potential range of activities associated with the proposed development would be beneficial to the Borough's economy. They would lead to job creation, enhancement of the local supply chain and increased spending, as well as raise the profile of the locality.

This would fit well with the aims of EEDA, the Essex Economic Partnership, Essex County Council and Chelmsford Borough Council to bring more visitors to the region. From an economic development and visitor/tourist perspective the planning application is supported.'

However the reality of the situation proved to be quite different and the countryside has been left with unnecessary development that could have been prevented if there had been more scrutiny of the deliverability and economic sustainability of the proposals. The latter now being one of the three dimensions of sustainable development set out in paragraph 7 of the NPPF.

The committee report concluded: -

"The proposal has been judged as a departure from the adopted development plan, and it is incumbent on the applicant to demonstrate the material circumstances sufficient to warrant support for the proposal. Whilst it is recognised that the racetrack would remove two areas of woodland, that the Showground Centre would introduce a substantial structure into the countryside and that the level and intensity of activity many have grown accustomed to will change, it is considered that sufficient evidence has been submitted to allow support for this proposal. These would include the continued success of the Showground as an asset to the Borough and the region, the erection of a landmark building of high architectural merit, the opportunity to enhance previously eroded woodland and wildlife habitats, the potential employment and economic benefits for the area, and the opportunity to provide a boost for equestrianism in this country'.

Whilst it is acknowledged that each application must be decided on its individual merits, the parallels between these proposals are obvious. It may well be the case that financial viability is a matter for the appellant, however there are clear lessons that can be learnt from the Great Leighs example. The LPA departed from rural constraint policy, on the basis that there were material considerations that outweighed the harm to the countryside. What was not apparent to them was whether the scheme could be delivered as proposed, so that the advantages they were seeking were actually delivered.

Whilst it is said that hindsight is a wonderful thing, there remains an opportunity with the appeal proposals for the Inspector to be satisfied that if there are material considerations that outweigh policy, those considerations can and will be delivered. In doing so, the AONB can be spared from extensive and unnecessary redundant development in the future.



Site as a showground



Landscape impact of redundant racecourse



Extent of redundant development

