

# **Planning application for the Donkey Field: why we local residents are asking for answers.**

An update from the Neston and Westwells Action Group (NWAG) on the concerns raised about how a major local planning decision was presented and considered at the Strategic Committee Meeting.

## **What is this about?**

As the majority of you know NWAG is a local group formed by local residents who are concerned about the scale and potential impacts of the gigantic Data Centre being built in the middle of our village on The Donkey Field. NWAG have now submitted a **formal complaint to Wiltshire Council** because we are worried that councillors were asked to make their decision using information that was, in key places, inaccurate, unclear, or incomplete—and that some relevant evidence provided by NWAG was not properly reflected in the material presented at the Strategic Committee Meeting. **Our main concerns (in plain English)**

### **1) Were key reports properly checked?**

Large planning applications often include technical reports paid for by the applicant in this case Ark. This is normal practice—but it makes independent checking especially important. Our concerns are that parts of Ark’s commissioned material were relied upon without enough scrutiny on behalf of Wiltshire Council, even after NWAG pointed out specific issues that needed correction.

### **2) Mapping and site context: did committee members see an accurate picture?**

- Wadswick Green (as you know a very large retirement village) did not appear to be identified or described clearly and consistently on the day.
- The positions of nearby homes just meters away from the proposed build, in our view, were not shown in a way that made the impacts on the residents/ village easy to understand.
- Some overhead maps/ labels and references appeared to reflect the areas past rather than the reality of today’s neighbourhood. By the use of old maps.
- When questions were asked at the committee meeting, we do not believe the clarification fully resolved the confusion created by the material shown to them.

The reason that this matters is because, committee members, have to weigh up these complex issues quickly. Objectors, such as NWAG were unable to then clarify these points due to not being allowed to speak again, it becomes even more important that the written reports and presentation are precise, balanced and up to date. This was not the case.

### **3) Greenfield or brownfield? New archival information**

One of the biggest planning questions is whether the Donkey Field should be treated as “brownfield” (previously developed) or “greenfield” (countryside). NWAG had obtained archival documents showing the site was returned to private ownership after wartime requisition and restored to agricultural use. NWAG are concerned this context was not clearly explained to

committee members, particularly where remaining concrete features were used to support a “previously developed” interpretation. One of our members spent 2 days in the Wiltshire Historical archives in Chippenham and from historical letters clearly proved that;

- The land was never owned by the Ministry of Defence.
- After the war, it was returned to private ownership and used agriculturally. The owners were financially compensated to return it back to agricultural land.
- Wiltshire Council were supposed to clear the land of the concrete bases, but failed to do so due to cost implications for the council. (Prospective developers have exposed these bases when bulldozing the land.)
- The historic use was accommodation for civilian workers and then displaced families.
- There is no evidence of features normally associated with an active military site. For example a perimeter fence.

NWAG recognises that previous decisions and appeals are relevant. However, our understanding is at the previous Donkey Field appeal this archival information was not available at the time. NWAG provided this information to the WWC several weeks before the Strategic Meeting. We are therefore asking the Council to explain how this new evidence was handled, and how councillors are advised when important information comes to light later in the planning process.

#### 4) Public representations: how were 1,200+ objections addressed?

A large number of concerned residents took the time to submit objections and make comments. We are asking for clarity on how these were summarised and weighed, and whether key themes raised by our community were accurately reflected in the officer report and recommendation.

#### 5) Important details left to conditions

We understand that planning “conditions” are often used to secure mitigation. Our concern is what information should be in place *before* a decision is made, rather than being left to later approval by way of putting conditions onto the planning approval. We are asking the Council to explain how it satisfied itself, and how they consider key matters were resolved at the right stage.

#### 6) Drainage and flood risk

Many residents have long-standing concerns about surface water and local drainage. NWAG raised questions about the drainage evidence early on and shared information that we believe should have been more fully tested. We are asking how resident-provided Technical Evidence was evaluated alongside consultee advice, and what checks were made against local flooding and historic drainage routes.

#### 7) Heritage and setting of listed buildings

We are also concerned about how the setting and impact on nearby heritage assets were assessed, as one listed building literally just by the children’s play area was not considered at all. This is not about being anti-development; it is about ensuring decisions properly consider the character and history of our landscape and historic village.

## 8) Jobs and “significant weight”

The planning proposal was linked to employment benefits. Our concern is that job numbers quoted during the process appeared to change frequently, and we did not see clear, consistent evidence presented to members to support figures that were said to carry “significant weight”. We are asking for transparency about what evidence was used and how it was tested. The employment numbers were 7 in the original planning application and on the day state as 87!

## What we’ve asked the Council to do

Our complaint asks for an investigation and a clear explanation of how errors or omissions occurred, what quality checks were applied, and what will change so that future committee decisions are based on accurate, properly tested information.

1. A review of the officer report and committee presentation materials for PL/2024/05527.
  - An explanation of how new archival evidence is handled and communicated to members.
  - Assurance that maps and drawings supporting key claims are checked and accurate.
  - Clearer standards on what facts and issues must be resolved before approval is given (rather than left to later conditions)
  - Improved transparency about monitoring and enforcement of conditions. Otherwise how will local residents know that the conditions have been carried out or just ignored.

## What happens next?

Wiltshire Council should respond to NWAG through its formal complaints procedure, setting out what it has found and what steps it will take. We will share updates with you all next month. The Donkey Field was originally approved for much needed housing not to be Industrialised.

## How you can help our village

- Please don’t just do nothing but actually assist NWAG to still prevent this build.
- Support us in obtaining a Judicial Review which residents seem to want us to work on. This all takes a lot of time and money.
- Write to our local councillors or directly to Wiltshire Council with specific questions if you are affected by noise or light pollution or drainage issues. Alternatively let NWAG know.
- Share local knowledge: historic drainage routes, flooding incidents, and changes in land use are often best evidenced by locals that know what is actually happening in the village. Tell your neighbours

NWAG really can’t do this without your help and if we don’t all stick together then more inappropriate builds will appear. Where next; the Rabbit Warren? Possibly another Data Centre? (Ark own the land but under another name) NWAG’s aim is straightforward: to protect our beautiful village from further industrialisation. Developers as you have seen get away with it if you just do nothing. There is a saying bad people get away with things if good people just sit and do nothing. Remember Ark said they could built this Data Centre at one of their other sites. It still doesn’t need to be built here, on The Donkey Field.

**Neston Westwells Action Group (NWAG). Reference: PL/2024/05527.**

