

FRIDAY 19 JULY
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mid Sussex District Council ‘bypassing local democracy’ to push through Hassocks development, say local councillors

Liberal Democrat councillors ask the Secretary of State to ‘call in’ the Friars Oak Fields application over concerns the developer has influenced the planning timetable, following FOI request

Local councillors in Hassocks have expressed concern that a controversial development is being pushed through by Mid Sussex District Council at short notice, while key opponents are away during the summer holidays.

The application to build 130 houses at Friars Oak Fields in Hassocks has been scheduled for consideration by the District Planning Committee on 25th July – a date on which the committee had not previously been due to meet, and which is only one day after the public consultation for Friars Oak Fields is due to conclude.

District Planning Committee meetings have long been scheduled for 1st and 29th August with many months advance notice given.

However, a Freedom of Information request revealed an email from the developer, Rydon Homes, to the Council in May. It indicated that an approval in August could affect their timetable in relation to an earlier application at the site, and queried whether the Committee was due to meet in July. Subsequent to the email, the July date was scheduled, raising concerns that the developer had influenced the planning timetable.

The Friars Oak Fields site has been the subject of planning applications over several years. Most recently, an application by Rydon Homes was turned down in November 2018 on the grounds that it did not comply with the Mid Sussex District Plan, with Hassocks having already met its housing allocation under the Plan.

Benedict Dempsey, District Councillor for Hassocks, said: “The people of Hassocks have been fighting to keep Friars Oak Fields as green space for years. By rushing this application through with little warning, during the summer holidays, key community representatives will be unable to attend.

“Committee members may also be unable to give proper consideration to public objections, as the public consultation does not conclude until the day before the meeting. This amounts to a bypassing of local democracy.

“Having fought so hard for years to protect Friars Oak Fields, the people of Hassocks will be rightly angry if this proposal goes to committee at such short notice, without local representatives to argue against it.

“We requested that the meeting be postponed to a date that had been scheduled properly in advance, but our request was refused.”

Alexander Sparasci, District Councillor for Hassocks, said: “It concerns us that this new meeting was scheduled after the developer appeared to indicate a preference for the application being considered in July rather than August.

“We are worried that this suggests the Council is more concerned with facilitating the timetable of developers than enabling local democratic processes.”

Given their concerns, the councillors have written to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, James Brokenshire, to ask that he ‘call in’ the application so it can be decided centrally.

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Kirsty Lord, County Councillor for Hassocks and Burgess Hill South, said: “We regret that we have had to take this action, but we have lost confidence that Mid Sussex District Council is able to assess this application in an impartial way.

“We are asking the Secretary of State to step in, because the way this application has been handled risks undermining confidence in the whole planning process.”

ENDS

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT

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