

Save Newlands Corner's concerns

Save Newlands Corner has numerous concerns about Surrey County Council's (SCC) response to the 1,400 representations submitted to the Planning Inspectorate (PINS). These relate to the areas of finance/money; the response in relation to the criteria which the Planning Inspectorate has, legally, to measure the application against in coming to a decision; and other more-general issues.

Importantly, SCC has not responded to the objections that it has not followed many of the Planning Inspectorate's own principles. These include gathering background information, communicating with the main stakeholders - local people, seeking the views of those local people, considering alternative management options such as a Friends of Newlands Corner, and considering the selection of managers other than Surrey Wildlife Trust.

Finance/money

- It is indicative of SCC priorities that the bulk of its response deals with money. This is not a legally recognised criterion for the Planning Inspectorate to consider.
- SCC makes it clear that imposing the excessive charges is not an exercise to meet reasonable costs of maintaining Newlands Corner. It is a method of financing the overall SCC budget.
- SCC has refused, repeatedly, to release the business plan on the grounds that it is incomplete. This is 15 months after it first presented its proposals to the SCC Cabinet!
- The proposed charges are not "a reliable and fair way of generating an income". Most users of Newlands Corner are from the Guildford area. This would place an unfair burden, in effect a tax, on the local neighbourhood to pay for geographically distant sites.

PINS criteria

Interests of the neighbourhood

- SCC's response fails to acknowledge that nearly 1,400 people and local councils and community groups opposed the application, as well as over 11,700 petitioners
- Charges would place restrictions on access for people and families of limited means with no alternative access to NC. SCC gives no assurances of a solution, only an indeterminate 'will monitor'. It would be impossible to monitor this. Even if SCC was able to do it, it doesn't explain what its solution might be.
- "work has been done to plot out where displacement parking may occur and this will be monitored" – once again SCC uses unsubstantiated generalities with no explanation of what would be done if displacement parking was found to be a problem to the neighbourhood.
- There remain major road safety implications for increased traffic, not solved by a revised speed limit, warning signs and other minor measures.
- SCC fails to mention that the all-ability trail and proposed play trail are the same. The all-ability trail is the only place for quiet enjoyment of Newlands Corner for those with walking difficulties. SCC's play trail proposal will concentrate groups of noisy children along the trail.

Public interest

SCC's response fails to address concerns about:

- damage to unspoiled countryside in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) by unwarranted introduction of parking machines and signage and, later this year, artificial play structures. None of the proposals "conserve or enhance" the beauty of the site.
- damage to an AONB and surrounding countryside by light pollution (it is irrelevant whether the light source is from cables or solar panels)
- implications for personal safety, if people have to leave their vehicles in hours of darkness to get a parking permit

- “updating” of the facilities, which is not defined. If it means adding new “visitor attractions” (e.g. artificial play structures), the public has clearly stated that it does not want them. A straightforward refurbishment of the toilets and all-ability trail would be welcomed.
- SCC’s statement “No work is planned in the view or on the open downland” – this is untrue. Since SCC’s letter was written, concrete plinths have been put down the slope to accommodate new benches which detract from the natural scene and iconic view.

General issues

- It should be made clear that benches are not funded by SCC, but by the public. The café building was funded by the Albury Estate. SCC has no part in its upkeep.
- The term “play pieces” is used to minimise the construction and effect of large play structures which would require local planning authority and Planning Inspectorate consent.
- “no plans to reconfigure the car park at present” – this is disingenuous. SCC knows its plans to increase vehicles from 255,000 a year to 365,000 within four years mean that the car park will not be able to cope in its present form. It does not cope now at peak times.
- SCC is making significant adverse changes to the site based on an assumption that people, especially those with children, will be encouraged to visit in quiet periods. The quiet periods are mainly those when children are at school.
- SCC has confirmed that motorcyclists would be charged, if they parked in a car park space for more than 20 minutes – a frequent occurrence during busy periods.
- SCC has consistently declined to discuss a Friends of NC as an alternative management/funding solution for Newlands Corner. It has insisted that such a charitable trust could only be used to provide additional funding and volunteers to help support its proposed parking charges and artificial play structures.