

## Surrey Countryside Under Threat

29 March 2017

To: Surrey County Councillors

Dear Councillor

I am writing to update you on the project being headed by the Surrey County Council (SCC) Countryside Group, under the policy direction of Cllr Goodman, to commercialise and develop Newlands Corner and other countryside sites in Surrey, ostensibly to make the Surrey Countryside Estate pay for itself. Please see the Appendix.

I ask you to consider the effect this project will have on the Surrey countryside as a whole and to take whatever action you can now to prevent this pending disaster.

Please think upon what sort of legacy we should leave for future generations. A beautiful, natural countryside, with thriving wildlife, that all can access, enjoy and learn from? Or a series of 'visitor attractions', restricted to those who can pay, which will gradually displace and replace the flora and fauna of the county, many of which are endangered or protected?

There is a large groundswell of opinion shared by the people you represent that the countryside SCC looks after belongs to the people. Whilst this might not be the case in the legal sense, ownership is part of the hearts and minds of the public and the overwhelming sentiment is that these places should be kept as natural as possible.

During busy times, the car park at Newlands Corner is filled with an eclectic mix of people - the 'haves', the 'have nots' and the 'just about managing'; people with classic cars, motorbikes, cycles and horses; dogs walkers, rambles, and families with picnics. Walk quietly in the woods and one sees the trees and wildlife as they should be. During the week, inner city schools bring children there to see natural countryside. Other youngsters are taking their Duke of Edinburgh awards. They all go there for what it has to offer in its natural state and because they love the site for what it is.

Could I please ask you to take this matter up with the SCC Cabinet, or full Council, to persuade them that our countryside, which is under tremendous pressure from commercialisation and developers, is too precious to be wasted in this way. Please ask them to stop the play structures at Newlands Corner on the grounds that they are unnecessary, unpopular, bad for an ancient woodland, bad for wildlife, and will cost a substantial sum when the Council is cutting back on essential services.

Last year Cllr Hodge said "We are committed to listening to our residents". We have yet to see that this is the case in relation to Newlands Corner. That could well be reflected in the ballot box. However, it is not too late.

Kind regards

**Sally Blake**

**Co-ordinator of the Save Newlands Corner Campaign Group**

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### Appendix

#### Background

Need to save money. SCC Cabinet decided to reduce payments to Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) to manage the Surrey Countryside Estate from £959,000 pa in 2013/14 to zero by 2021 due to financial pressures. However, there is no legal requirement to provide public facilities at, or to maintain high-standard access to, this countryside despite taking it on originally. Having access is all that is required – the rest is a luxury.

First target: Newlands Corner. SCC's Cabinet agreed a project on 27 October 2015, to spend £400,000 to install car parking infrastructure and a series of artificial play structures at Newlands Corner, together with refurbishment of the toilets and an all-ability trail. This was based on 122,000 vehicles visiting the site. The underlying purpose was to make money from Newlands Corner by harnessing its existing popularity, and turning it into a visitor attraction, to maintain that site and other sites in Surrey.

Next target: Ockham Common. This was considered as the next suitable site for commercialisation and development in the same way, but with lower potential financial rewards, and placed on a slower track. Other sites are likely to follow.

#### Parking Charges

Parking charge infrastructure. In February 2017, the SCC obtained Planning Inspectorate consent to install three pay machines (on the edge of the woodland) on concrete bases with signs and solar panels, and eight parking signs including five along the grass boundary in front of the view at Newlands Corner. The site is in the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This infrastructure cannot in any way be said to “conserve and enhance” the natural beauty of the site – the main reason for designation as an AONB and prime responsibility of its guardians.

Massive local opposition. 12,000 people have signed a petition against all of the proposed changes at Newlands Corner. At a public meeting held by SCC and Surrey Wildlife Trust, 99% voted against the proposals. There has been a stream of letters against the proposals in the local paper, over many months, whilst only two people have been in favour, one of these being Cllr Goodman. There were 1,400 objections to the Planning Inspectorate against the parking charge infrastructure, including 10 parish councils and 4 residents associations. In the Planning Inspectorate's own words, 100-200 objections is regarded as “huge”. SCC dismissed all of this opposition by telling the Planning Inspectorate that the Save Newlands Corner campaign had encouraged people to object. This implied that Surrey people and their representatives cannot think for themselves. This is appalling. It also ignored the SCC team's own campaign for their proposed so-called 'improvements' at Newlands Corner.

Parking charges too high. These will be £1 an hour for the majority of cars. The SCC team has made much of the £4 maximum, free parking for under 20 minutes, season ticket available, and free for blue badge holders. These will only benefit a minority. The project was approved on the basis of 122,000 vehicles each year visiting the site. As campaigners said, and now statistics show, there are 255,000 vehicles each year. Local people will be paying hundreds of thousands of pounds each year over what is necessary, for 'improvements' they don't want, for inefficient management, and towards the cost of the rest of the Surrey countryside. This is grossly unfair.

People on low incomes excluded. Many of those who go to Newlands Corner fall in the 'just about managing' group. These include many elderly people and families, as well as other groups such as carers looking after those with dementia. Such people visit frequently for an affordable trip to beautiful natural countryside. Their access will be severely restricted, possibly denied. Access to countryside for exercise and mental health is now promoted as beneficial, with financial benefits for social care and the health service. This is the very group that benefits most.

Maintenance costs too high. At Newlands Corner, SCC is only responsible for maintenance of the car park, toilets, visitor room and trails, not for managing the land. For this, Surrey Wildlife trust has been paid £157,000 pa, and the toilets and all-ability trail haven't even been maintained properly. Where has the public's money gone? With car park charging and artificial play structures added, the cost will increase to an incredible £319,000 pa. A local charitable trust, the Friends of the Hurtwood, manages 15 car parks, 3,000 acres of land, and 60 miles of paths and bridleways, for £70,000 pa and raises sufficient funds to do so.

Financial plans not disclosed. The SCC team has refused to release the financial plans on which its proposals are based. SCC has said, however, that it anticipates an increase in car numbers from 255,000 to 365,000 in 4 years, then more beyond. The car park has only 195 spaces and cannot accommodate such an increase. The site is used intensively enough already. If this amount of cars is needed to make the project pay for itself, it is not sustainable. The project's underlying purpose is to make money. The financial plans must be disclosed. Over a period of more than a year, the public has been refused sight of the business plan on the grounds that it is not finished. Such a timescale to complete it is appalling financial management.

### **Urban Play Structures**

Next stage. The SCC project team has said that it now intends to apply to the Planning Inspectorate for consent to carry out works on the common, and to SCC's own planning department for planning permission, for a series of up to ten large, artificial play structures. The number appears to be a movable feast, indicating the disarray within the Countryside Group, given that the structures were supposed to be introduced in the spring of 2016. These would be placed along a trail in cleared areas in the woodland at Newlands Corner.

Huge local opposition. When the public were asked to give their opinion on the designs of these large artificial play structures, 85% said they did not want them at all. By the time the SCC team held its public meeting, 99% were against. This level of opposition can surely not be discounted. How can public money be spent in straitened times to pay for something people simply do not want?

Ancient woodland. The woodland in which the play structures would be installed is full of old yew trees which date back hundreds of years. One is reputedly two thousand years old. A survey of Newlands Corner and Merrow Downs by the Ancient Yew Group identified 123 yews with girths over 3 metres. It is through this very woodland that the play structures are to be placed. There is grave concern in the Ancient Yew Group that SCC's plans to increase footfall by 50% within four years will cause significant damage.

The Housing White Paper issued by the Government on 7 February 2017 (para A.38, p.77-78) proposes to add "Ancient Woodland and aged or veteran trees" to a list of "national policies it regards as providing a strong reason to restrict development" and says these are "irreplaceable habitats". A report on Forestry in England by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 21 March 2017 (paras 64-74, p.23-25) heard evidence that ancient woodland "is disappearing at a frighteningly fast rate" and "is not adequately protected by the planning system, and developers use that [planning] loophole and will put infrastructure in particular through ancient woodland". The EFRA Committee recommended that the Government implement the proposals in the White Paper and that a register of ancient and veteran trees and ancient woodland is maintained.

Protected species. The woodland is home to species protected by law, including hazel dormice, Roman snails and six different types of bat. A professional survey has found evidence of dormice at a number of the sites proposed for the play structures, and they also forage throughout the woodland. A recent report said 17 counties in England have already lost all of their dormice. One of the bat species identified has a UK population of only 15,000. The installation and ongoing use of the play structures will be a significant disturbance to the wildlife on the site across a wider area than just the footprint of the structures themselves. One of the proposed parking meters is very close to where dormice activity has been found. SCC Countryside Group has failed to confirm that a survey conducted in respect of the play structures also covered the woodland areas adjacent to the parking charge equipment. Failure to obtain a mitigation licence in advance of works (in this case, parking charge equipment) and then simply move any dormice found without such a licence is a criminal offence.

The National Trust is following a more enlightened path. It announced plans on 20 March 2017 "to help reverse the decline in wildlife on all the land in our care". It said "We aim to create 25,000 hectares of new habitats by 2025" and "The National Trust was set up to protect places of natural beauty, and we plan to create and restore 'priority' wildlife habitats on 10 per cent of our land".

Natural environment for children. Newlands Corner already has lots of natural play structures for children - fallen trees to clamber over (similar to the artificial structures), trees to climb, places to build dens, hollows and hidden paths to explore, grassy slopes to roll down, and wildlife and plants to see. Experts have said that a natural environment is much better for children to play in. There are already artificial play structures in Guildford, some 3 miles away, installed in an urban park where they are much more appropriate and at Alice Holt. No evidence has been produced that artificial play structures would attract more children into the countryside. More to the point, there has been no demand for them at Newlands Corner – quite the opposite.

Cost cannot be justified. It is very difficult to understand how SCC can continue to justify a cost of £400,000, including up to £210,000 for the artificial play structures, in the current economic climate, for changes that people do not want.

### **Illegal Activities**

There is 'creeping' commercialisation at Newlands Corner, combined with 'works' on this registered common, without the proper consent, that have been organised or condoned by SCC and SCC's managers, Surrey Wildlife Trust. This may also be happening in other areas of the Surrey Countryside Estate (it has happened at Ockham Common), particularly with the increasingly commercial approach being followed by Surrey Wildlife Trust.

Christmas tree sales compound. This covered a large area and was in place for about a month leading up to Christmas. It included fencing, a cabin and a caravan. The Planning Inspectorate wrote, when asked for advice and sent photographs, "The erection of fencing and a cabin structure on common land, including within a car park on common land, requires s38 consent. Temporary structures are not exempt from the consent requirements. Temporary fencing is exempt in very specific circumstances and the circumstances you describe do not fall within the exemption". This was pointed out to the SCC Countryside Group on 3 February 2017 and an explanation requested.

BMW motorcycle sales display. This covered the same large area, on 25 February 2017. It went ahead despite the warning note sounded on 3 February 2017 about the sale of Christmas trees. The Planning Inspectorate wrote, when asked for advice and sent photographs, "The trailer, gazebo and stands are all "structures" (s38(3)(b)) [of the Commons Act 2006] and are not exempt. If we had received an application we would have determined it". This was also pointed out to the SCC team and an explanation requested.

Concrete plinths with benches. In January 2017, Surrey Wildlife Trust, apparently at the instigation of the SCC team, laid six areas of concrete, totalling 168 square feet, for the installation of benches down the main viewing slope of Newlands Corner. The Planning Inspectorate wrote when asked for advice and sent photographs "The introductory paragraph [of guidance] indicates that works that are for the resurfacing of land do not fall outside the scope of s38 of the Commons Act 2006 and therefore need consent..... Whether such a base constitutes resurfacing that needs consent or is part and parcel of the placing of a seat is a matter for the courts". An explanation was requested from the SCC team as to why consent was not thought necessary.

### **A Different Way Forward**

The current project to commercialise Newlands Corner and turn it into a visitor attraction, with other areas of the Surrey Countryside Estate being considered for the same treatment, is ill thought-out, unwanted, harmful to the environment, extremely unpopular with the people you represent, and unnecessary.

This surely cannot be the legacy that Surrey County Council wants to hand down.

There is a different way forward, with far greater vision, that will leave our areas of beautiful natural countryside unspoilt for future generations and free for all to enjoy.

Reduce costs. Review the appointment of Surrey Wildlife Trust, which has employed a commercial team and is now making all its 16 countryside rangers redundant (with only 2 re-employed in 10 new roles – a huge loss of experience which has resulted in the suspension of volunteer projects until June). The cost of maintaining Newlands Corner is £157,000 pa and is estimated to increase to £319,000 pa after the so called 'improvements'. The Hurtwood estate costs only £70,000 pa to maintain without the overheads.

Consider some funding. Can Surrey really not afford a tiny fraction of its budget to maintain its Countryside Estate?

Use charitable monies. We have offered to set up a Friends of Newlands Corner to take over management of the site and to fund and maintain it as a means of avoiding both parking charges and artificial play structures. We produced a proposal on this basis under which maintenance of car park, trails and toilets would be carried out without changing the natural countryside into something else. SCC has rejected this to date by saying it will only accept it to support its management of the site and parking charges and play structures. The offer is still on the table. If this concept was rolled out across the Countryside Estate this could be formed into a partnership of the 'Friends' of the Surrey countryside which would remove responsibility in its entirety from SCC.

Market the countryside in a different way. Newlands Corner is packed with natural features that children enjoy and learn from. Market it under its old name of Fairyland? Produce a plan with the natural play features on? Treat it as a reserve of flora and fauna? Show the wonders of a natural environment. Encourage children into the countryside for the right reasons.

## **Summing up**

If the current project continues, the Surrey Countryside Estate will be increasingly urbanised and commercialised. This is not what the vast majority of people want. In an increasingly pressurised world, and a particularly-pressurised part of the UK, people need, and say they want, to escape to natural environments to recharge their batteries, for solace and for contemplation. These environments need to be islands within the urbanised areas, easily-reached and dependable in their lack of commercialisation and artificiality. Nothing SCC is proposing provides this.

There is another way. It needs that greater, more far-sighted, vision. And it needs the courage to change course before too much damage has been done. Most of all, it needs a council that listens to what the public actually wants.