

Press Release



11th December 2017

Public meeting called to save car parking at Pine Grove

Community leaders act to expose planning errors and present alternative scheme

Crowborough Community Association (CCA) are supporting a public meeting in January in a bid to bring Wealden District Council and Abbey Developments to the negotiating table over a plan to build 68 homes at the expense of nearly 100 public car parking spaces in the town centre, and to present a better alternative. The current plan would see homes built just a few metres from Crowborough Community Centre – a licensed place of entertainment for up to 500 people – and leave it with just 16 car parking spaces.

The CCA now believes the planning application scheduled to go before Wealden's Planning North Committee is fundamentally flawed, and must fail, because the land does not have the necessary nitrogen 'credits' under the rules for protecting the Ashdown Forest Special Protection Area. Wealden appear to have grossly exaggerated the number of staff associated with the now boarded-up Beaconwood buildings which are being used to claim the necessary Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) credits needed for planning permission to be granted.

"Wealden advised Abbey that AADT credits could be based on an assumption of 190 staff employed at Beaconwood pre-1989, which cannot be correct," said David Larkin, a community centre trustee and director. "Even using their own figures on Beaconwood's floor

space, the maximum employee figure could only be 67. In reality, during the last five years that the building was in use, the highest number of people employed there was only 27.

“If this is not simply breathtaking incompetence, then I wouldn’t like to speculate on how or why the erroneous figure of 190 was given to Abbey who must now be wondering whether drawing up plans and submitting them to Wealden has been a waste of time and effort.”

Pressure is building on Abbey and Wealden to come together to modify their planning application in line with what is legal and sensible. So far, some 230 objection letters have been sent to Wealden along with representations from Crowborough Town Council, Withyham Parish Council and Sussex Police*. The letter from the police says that “in order to sustain a safe and sustainable environment” the loss of the spaces currently provided by the Mead House Car Park “or even a percentage of them” would be a concern.

“Wealden and Abbey Developments have worked together on this proposed development with pre-application meetings and a pre-sale contract agreed to maximise the financial return to Wealden District Council, as the land owner, at the expense of an essential community facility,” said Chantal Wilson, chairman of the community centre’s trustees and board of directors. “The public meeting will leave Wealden and Abbey under no illusion as to the strength and depth of Crowborough’s opposition to this plan.”

The community centre trustees are seeking an alternative that would see the development scaled back and replacement of ‘lost’ car parking spaces on land currently occupied by the Beaconwood buildings, owned by Wealden. This would be in line with the recommendation of a senior government planning inspector who, in 2015, stated that at least part of the Pine Grove site “should be preserved for both office floor space and/or community facilities as well as car parking” with a maximum of 50 housing units. Wealden have chosen to ignore this advice.

“I want to be clear. We are not against housing development,” said Mrs Wilson “but it must work for everyone. The plan we are proposing would not only preserve much needed public car parking but would provide the essential landscaped ‘buffer zone’ between people’s homes and our centre which is licensed for late night entertainment. Anything less would be

complete folly and have the potential to cause conflict between residents and visitors to the centre.”

The public meeting will be open to all but only Crowborough residents will have a vote. It is being called by a group of electors under the terms of the Local Government Act 1972 (Schedule 12 Part 15) and is supported by the Crowborough Community Association and the town’s Chamber of Commerce. A very large turnout is anticipated and invitations to attend will be sent to town councillors, Crowborough’s county councillors and all Wealden councillors representing Crowborough wards, as well as the town’s MP, Nusrat Ghani, whose support is being sought.

* In order to “reduce the opportunity for crime and disorder and the fear of crime,” Sussex Police wrote: “My concern would be the close proximity of the centre to a large percentage of the development and the exposure and potential impact it would have on residents’ amenities who would be living adjacent to a busy, thriving community centre. The development will be exposed to noise and traffic movements 7 days a week.”

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Crowborough Community Association

The Crowborough Community Association has been active in Crowborough since 1975, when it opened the original CCA Hall in Park Road, built in 1925 as a Guide hut. It was ‘home’ to many of the town’s local organisations until momentum for a new community centre swelled following a public consultation by Wealden District Council on future retail development in the town. With funding from Crowborough Town Council and the National Lottery and on land donated by Wealden District Council, the new Crowborough Community Centre, costing £3.2 million, opened in 2012. It is now very much at the heart of the community with an average of 260 bookings each month for a large number of clubs, associations and individuals. The Centre is now financially self-supporting having exceeded bookings and income targets.