

Community Statement

Proposal:

Erection of three family homes
using existing access with
associated parking and amenity
space

Address:

Walden Acres,
Wokingham Road,
Hurst,
RG10 0RU

January 2023



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- 1.1 This statement has been prepared and submitted in support of the accompanying full planning application for the erection of three dwellings (a semi-detached pair and a single detached dwelling) with associated upgraded access, parking and amenity space at Walden Acres in Hurst. This follows a previously withdrawn application for broadly the same proposal.
- 1.2 The reason that the previous application was withdrawn was due to a change to the red line and due to provide the opportunity to respond to the comments raised by the local community and the Protect Hurst Action Group (PHAG). A separate Community Involvement statement has now been submitted with this application which covers this matter in more detail. It is hoped that interested members of the community will review this document which clarifies a number of misconceptions.
- 1.3 This application is again made by Mr T Drake and Mr R Drake, both longstanding local residents who grew up in the village, with Walden Acres being their family home. The application is also made by Churchgate Premier Homes, acting as agent, who are a local developer. As can be seen on their website, Churchgate Premier Homes are a niche developer who typically only build on small sites comprising 1 – 4 new homes. They are not a volume house builder.
- 1.4 The existing site comprises part of the oversized plot associated with Walden Acres, a detached dwellinghouse. The spacious plot has been maintained as manicured garden since the dwelling was built many decades ago. The site largely comprises open lawn and this application seeks to make more effective use of the land, which has otherwise become burdensome for the land owner to maintain and certainly surplus to requirements, for three well-appointed new homes.
- 1.5 Part of the owners motivation in making this application is to close the existing gap to the side of Walden Acres in order to prevent the land from being used by any future owner as an access to the unrelated field to the north-east (off Broadcommon Road). The owners are vehemently against the development of that field.

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1.6 This application proposes the subdivision of the north-west side of the landholding to create three new plots which will make sensitive but more effective use of the land. The approach seeks to provide three family homes which exhibit a high level of design reflective of the traditional architecture found locally.

1.7 Public consultation has taken place, whilst not a statutory requirement, in order to seek the view of the local community. This has included both meeting with the Parish Council and reaching out to adjacent neighbours.

Why are these new homes being proposed?

1.8 Whilst the Drake family have lived on the site for many years, the land is becoming continually burdensome to maintain. The garden plot associated with Walden Acres is significantly oversized and far beyond what anyone would typically desire given the normal-sized family home that sits on the site.

1.9 The costs associated with garden maintenance is now extremely expensive, compounded by the cost of living crisis. The brothers are therefore seeking to make better use of the land but in a conscientious and considerate way which genuinely does not impact upon the village or any existing members of the community, especially adjacent neighbours.

Why does the red line not extend all the way to the rear boundary with the Broadcommon Road field?

1.10 The planning application seeks permission for only 3 new family homes. Unfortunately, given the extraordinary cost in construction at present, coupled with falling house prices and rising interest rates (costs of lending) it would be entirely unviable to deliver a proportion of these units as affordable house.

1.11 This is recognised as a matter of principle by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which confirms that affordable housing should not be sought on developments of less than 10

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units. Unfortunately, Wokingham Council's local policy with respect to affordable housing is inconsistent with the NPPF and has a 'catch-all' threshold that, for sites exceeding 0.16 hectares, 40% must be provided as affordable housing (or as a financial planning obligation).

1.12 Clearly, this policy is to ensure that sites are not purposefully underdeveloped in a bid to avoid making affordable housing contributions. For the application proposal, however, only 3 houses are proposed because this would respond to the low-density character of the area and respond to the linear layout and building line along Wokingham Road. In effect, therefore, the proposal would be penalised for being low density and having long rear gardens.

1.13 It is, therefore, necessary to exclude the land in order to the red line site area to fall below the 0.16ha threshold.

Is there any ulterior motive to develop Broadcommon Road field?

1.14 It is unequivocal that the planning application has absolutely nothing to do with Broadcommon Road field. Walden Acres is owned by Tim and Rupert Drake who have absolutely no control, stake or association with any of the land to the north of the site.

1.15 The application site would be an ideal access point had there been any intention to develop Broadcommon Road field. The proposal, being 3 new family homes which close the gap between Walden Acres and the neighbours to the north-west, would actually prevent any future access from being provided. The proposal would therefore serve to safeguard against the development of the field.

1.16 The owner is not looking to move from Walden Acres, even after the 3 homes proposed as part of this application have been built. Accordingly, they are vehemently against hundreds of homes being built on open fields, not only due to the devaluing impact on their own property, but given the significant highway implications this would have on the village, not to mention to community services.

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1.17 Furthermore, the joint applicant, Churchgate Premier Homes is a niche housebuilder who specialise in developments of 1 – 4 new homes. This is evident from their website.

1.18 Fundamentally, the applicants are considerate members of the community and stand in solidarity with the Parish Council against any development of Broadcommon Road field. They are keen to see the planning application approved to prevent any potential future access point in years to come.

Will supporting this application prevent future development on Broadcommon Road field or any other land around the village?

1.19 The applicants have no control over Broadcommon Road field and can neither predict nor directly influence what the private owner of that field intends to do in future. That being said, it is understood that Broadcommon Road field has access issues because Broadcommon Road itself is insufficient to serve an access point for large numbers of new homes. The application site would therefore logically provide an access point onto Wokingham Road.

1.20 The development of the site for the 3 homes would close this gap, preventing access from Wokingham Road. If the owner of the field is unable to find an access anywhere else, it can be considered that indirectly, supporting this application does indeed significantly reduce the likelihood of Broadcommon Road field ever achieving planning permission. The Council will not support any development that does not have sufficient and safe access.

1.21 Furthermore, there is currently a housing shortage in Wokingham district as a whole. In this situation, it is logical that large scale development should be directed to major towns whilst smaller scale sustainable housing developments should come forward within the villages. As Hurst is experiencing, however, there is still significant pressure to deliver large scale development and volume house builders will continue to submit speculative applications for open greenfield sites until housing need is satisfied.

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- 1.22 By keeping a record of small scale contributions, such as Walden Acres, the Parish Council can log housing delivery in the village. The collective number can then be used as part of a neighbourhood plan to determine housing requirement for the village specifically. Once adopted, the Neighbourhood Plan becomes the primary policy for the village which determines whether or not permission should be granted. In effect, it allows the community real control to prevent major speculative housing development.

What will happen if planning permission is refused for the 3 new homes?

- 1.23 As explained above, the land is surplus to requirements and is burdensome to maintain, both physically and financially. If planning permission is not obtained, the brothers will have to consider their options which, most likely, will be to sell Walden Acres in its entirety. Naturally, the house and land would therefore be on the open market for anyone who is interested. This could include speculative house builders and the landowners to the north.

What benefits will there be to the local community if these 3 homes are approved?

- 1.24 This is only a minor development comprising 3 family homes and therefore the benefits are limited. That being said, this would help to sustain the local population growth in the village, allowing people who have grown-up in the village and have families of their own to move back into Hurst. As with many villages, the aging population coupled with the lack of historic housing delivery in villages tends to push out people who have grown up in the village due to lack of housing opportunities.
- 1.25 More directly, the 3 new homes would attract a community infrastructure levy of many tens of thousands of pounds. This is payable to the Council by law and must be spent by the Local Authority to improve the local area.

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Is the site outside of the 'development limits' of the village?

- 1.26 Wokingham Council have a set of policy maps which include a very arbitrary line around Hurst effectively defining what areas are within or outside of the settlement. These do not bear any relevance to reality and often exclude entire residential areas of the village. This part of Wokingham Road is no exception.
- 1.27 Whilst this area is clearly very developed in character and clearly a long-established residential area of the village, the area is outside of the defined 'developed area'. In real terms, however, the site is clearly part of the village, as with the neighbouring properties and therefore part of the true developed area.
- 1.28 As with all planning policy matters, it is a balanced exercise and the Planning Officers have the remit to consider these circumstances and make decisions based upon planning merit with due weight given to all material matters and circumstances.
- 1.29 Given the housing need in the District and as determined by the Planning Inspectorate with respect to the recent planning permission granted at Appeal for the triangle on Sawpit Lane, the outer 'transitional areas' of the village can be considered suitable for housing given the character and impact considerations.
- 1.30 The application site clearly falls within a well-established residential part of the village and the proposals would actively enhance and reinforce the character of the streetscene. The attractive and high quality design of the new homes would actively reinforce the character this part of the village.

If planning permission is granted, when would these houses be built?

- 1.31 Subject to planning permission being granted, the build programme for these new homes would be less than 12 months. The planning application is supported by a Construction

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Management Plan to ensure that the building work does not occur during unsociable hours and to prevent any impact on the highway network.

Summary

- 1.32 It is hoped that this community statement has clarified a number of incorrect rumours about this site and has given genuine reassurance to the local community. Tensions in the village are understandably heightened at present given recent planning applications, not least the Appeal underway for the 200 dwellings proposed off Tape Lane. Unlike those speculative developments for hundreds of homes, however, this is a genuine and small scale proposal for only 3 well designed and high quality family homes. This is also an application made by two longstanding members of the community who grew up in the village.