

Draft email re PDI decision

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Dear Asmat,

We are writing to you jointly as a group of cross party councillors, independent experts and community forums with major concerns around the planning decision on Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> July, planning application 22/01672/FUL, Thurrock Football Club, Ship Lane, Aveley to grant permission for the development of a 1224 space PDI (car preparation plant) on Green Belt land on Ship Lane in Aveley, to the applicant, Group 1 Automotive.

Our request is going to centre on the conduct of the meeting and we will question the legality of how it was run, the quality of the environmental studies, and the decision reached. This is in addition to the clearly inappropriate nature of a car preparation plant on Green Belt land, and the manifold planning regulations this goes against.

The meeting itself was shambolic, with councillors running around arguing over who could take part, who could be a substitute, with members of the committee themselves not knowing what was going on, let alone the viewing public. There were several issues, which I will outline in detail below, but regarding this agenda item one of our concerns was the use of Cllr Adam Carter as substitute for Cllr Piccolo. Cllr Carter is in the Cabinet, and it is not usual for a cabinet member to take a substitute position on committees.

This particular application has been submitted three times before, and twice been before the planning committee. The latest committee was in August 2021. On all three occasions, the advice from senior planning officers has been consistent, as indeed it should be as there have been no substantive changes. This advice has clearly been to refuse the application as it is inappropriate development on the Green Belt. I don't think much planning knowledge is needed to see that a car plant is not something that Thurrock needs so much that all Green Belt protections should be overridden. Unsurprisingly, then, it was turned down decisively, with 7 members voting against and 2 in favour - Cllr Kelly, who was Chair, and Cllr James Halden.

The actual debate on the 13<sup>th</sup> July was often off-topic, and there was no legal adviser present to remind members of their actual planning remit. In particular, is the matter of the gifting of the existing football stadium on the site to Grays Athletic FC. This was not a planning issue, as was made clear by Matthew Gallagher on the night. No permission is needed, and it could clearly operate as a stadium without the intervention of Group 1. However, this was repeatedly brought up in discussion. Indeed, it was the reason that Cllr Carter gave for going against the advice of the experienced and qualified planning officer.

A further concern regarding the conduct on the night was the change of vote by Cllr Polley. In 2021 she was strongly opposed, saying this:

*"The suggestion this is not manicured green belt doesn't count. We are ripping out the green lung through Thurrock, and this area serves as a green belt to help mitigate some of the traffic pollution and air quality. So I*

*think we get into dangerous territory when we say it's not effective green belt – it's doing what it's meant to do. It's part of our green lung."*

Now in 2023, she has done an about turn and voted in favour of it. People can change their mind, of course, but this is a planning committee governed by planning law. Officers had clearly laid out the reasons why this was inappropriate development on green belt and the mitigating circumstances were insufficiently weighted to go against this. For Councillor Polley to go against this advice, and against her previous stance, there should be clear planning reasons. The reasons behind her change of stance were opaque, particularly given that there is no substantive change to the plans. At one point, she asked the chair for help in shaping her response.

The vote was tied, 3-3, with Cllrs. Kelly, Polley and Carter in favour. This was in opposition to the very clear advice consistently given by planning officer, Matthew Gallagher. No clear planning reasons were given as to the reasons, and then Cllr Kelly, as chair who had gone against officer advice, had the casting vote. For him to give strong weight to the turning circle for HGVs is not right, as HGVs through Aveley now has become a minor issue, and the circle isn't on the road but on the PDI site itself. He also gave strong weight to the creation of jobs, but it has previously generally been accepted that up to 30 jobs is a very low number for a site this size.

One further concern on the night was the question of whether Group 1 had fully scoped all possible sites for this PDI centre. Given that they intend to transport cars here from 4 ports around the country, Sheerness in Kent, Halewood in Merseyside, Grimsby in Humberside and Portbury in Bristol, it is clear that there is absolutely no requirement that the centre is in Thurrock, and this site is not uniquely suited to the proposed development. Therefore, the scoping for a site does not need to be confined to Thurrock, which apparently it was. The statement from Cllr Polley, repeated by Cllr Kelly, that 'we already have this traffic' is clearly bizarre, as we do not, as previously stated these cars are coming from four corners of England, so most of them don't actually come through Thurrock at the moment, still less through Aveley.

We have further major concerns around the quality of ecological assessment made by the applicants. We have had correspondence from Essex Field Group, and we attach a summary of their concerns as an attachment. This was carried out by 'Iceni Ecology' which suggests a link to Iceni Projects, who are agents behind the planning application for Mardyke Park and many other applications throughout Thurrock.

Beyond this agenda item, there were other matters of concern regarding the conduct of the meeting. For example, Cllr Thandi was present, apparently as substitute for Cllr Jacqui Maney, when she hadn't asked for a substitute and was present herself. Neither were able to take part in the PDI decision, the former for a conflict of interest and the latter as she wasn't on the committee in April when it was discussed. He was apparently brought in to vote on the later agenda item, Mardyke Park also on Ship Lane, but Cllr Maney had not been informed of, or requested, a substitute. Cllr Thandi left, but there was no clear legal advice on this matter, meaning that the item was deferred. A further agenda item, regarding the provision of a 3G pitch on Belhus Park, was also deferred, again because of disagreement and lack of clarity over who could take part in this discussion and vote. Note that a resident, Cathy Sisterson, had been given permission to speak on this last item, even though it had been carried over from April (but not discussed).

We are sending this jointly, as we have diminishing faith in the planning committee under the chairmanship of Cllr Kelly to properly carry out it's function. This lays it open to charges of bias and even of corruption. At a time when the council's reputation has already been severely damaged by the financial situation, we think that the integrity and transparency of all our decision making is crucial, and we are now giving you the opportunity to

scrutinise the proceedings leading to the decision on this application and ensure that you are confident in their integrity.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Maureen Pearce

Steve Taylor, CPRE representative

Cllr Srikanth Panjala

John Purkiss, Chair of WELCOM Forum

Cathy Sisterson, Aveley's Green Belt Action Group

Craig Johnson, CEO Aveley Football Club

John Rowles, Chair of Purfleet Forum

Sue Hewer, Chair of Aveley and Kenningtons Forum

Cllr Fraser Massey

Cllr Gary Byrne

Cllr Sue Sammons