

Minutes of the Withyham Parish Council **PLANNING COMMITTEE** meeting held at Groombridge Village Hall, Station Road, Groombridge on 9th February 2026 at 6.30pm

PRESENT: Cllrs Allan Gaukroger, Robert Gordon-James (Meeting Chair), Di Kelly, Penny Lawne, and Beth Rhodes.

In attendance: Natalie Brett – Assistant Clerk (for Minutes)
Kelly Gaynor – The Clerk (to observe)
Wealden District Councillor Jessika Hulbert

Members of the public are encouraged to attend the meetings in person or via Zoom and there is an opportunity at the start of the meeting for them to address the Planning Committee. There were 76 members of the public in attendance. 72 members of the public in attendance were opposed to 6.1 with 4 in support of 6.1.

A spokesperson for the 72 members of the public in attendance against 6.1 read the following statement:

I am representing a steering group of concerned residents set up to oppose the development.

As you are aware the previous planning application for the same number of houses on the same site was refused – refused both at planning committee in council and on appeal.

The land in question has the protection of National Landscape (formerly known as AONB) and is outside the development boundaries of Groombridge as they currently stand. Whilst this protection does not prevent development the bar is set very high where the application is for a major development like this one.

HAVE THE DEVELOPERS JUMPED OVER THAT BAR WITH THIS APPLICATION?

As the Inspector stated in his Appeal Decision “..the harm to the landscape character of the AONB would be significant and long lasting and would present a conflict with both local and national policy.....the benefits identified would not amount to material considerations of significant weight to outweigh this harm....”

The inspector’s reason was: “The built forms, including two storey homes with intervening garages, and associated subdivision of the land, access roads, parking areas and paraphernalia would result in this part of the site becoming distinctly residential and substantially losing its openness and rural attributes.”

The openness and rural attributes are essential to our bit of the Weald National Landscape

You would have expected a considerable change in the design and layout of the master plan in order to retain the rural attributes and openness.

So what does this application deliver? The answer is not a great deal.

- *The mix of housing may have changed but the number remains the same*
- *There is still subdivision, houses, garages and access roads and paraphernalia meaning the site is residential not rural.*

- *The increased buffers on the northern and southern boundaries and the small increases in the distance between dwellings does not resolve the issue of the obstruction of the far-reaching views.*
- *The land is still the highest point of this part of the village.*

Last week the 'Focused' Draft Local Plan was issued by Wealden. This is not a planning consideration but it includes this site. It's conclusion, based on reasoning that is inconsistent with that used for other sites in Groombridge, is that it is 'Deliverable'.

However, in reaching that conclusion, significant concerns have been raised – concerns that cannot simply be brushed aside. In particular:

1. The need to significantly reduce the visual impact of the development, especially when viewed from Lealands Close, Station Road, and the surrounding public rights of way. The developer has not done that.

The Parish Council should object to the planning application on these grounds alone

BUT Also:

WHAT ABOUT ROAD SAFETY AND THE ACCESS ROAD?

The draft plan also states concerns about:

The requirement for genuinely safe and reliable vehicular access to the site.

The developer has not provided that because it cannot be achieved within the confines of narrow Station Road layout at the point of access which does not have safe pedestrian walkways.

It goes without saying that the safety of members of our community and visitors to Groombridge should not be compromised.

As part of our case against the original unsuccessful application, we engaged the services of a consultancy specialising in highway design to look at the proposed site access off Station Road. This was not just a desktop exercise. The consultant visited the site and even brought his bike to test the speeds realistically obtainable on Back Lane (a BOAT (Byway open to all traffic) not a bridleway as the developer calls it).

Within the summary of their report they state the following... "[we] do have highway safety concerns in relation to the proposed access junction as well as the point at which the proposed access would cross over the byway that is located between the main body of the site and Station Road."

Those concerns were not peripheral—they went to the heart of highway safety, and they focused on the following:

- *The alarmingly close proximity of the proposed Station Road access to Lealands Close, creating a junction-to-junction distance that falls far below any acceptable minimum. This is not a marginal design flaw; it is a clear and foreseeable danger. It has not changed.*
- *The visibility splay to the right at the proposed access extends over land the developer does not own, meaning they cannot secure the sightlines required for safe manoeuvring. This has not changed.*

- *The visibility splays at the Back Lane crossing are wholly unfit for purpose, having been calculated using standards intended for horses rather than the much faster, more frequent cyclists who rely on Back Lane. This is not a minor misjudgement; it is a serious failure to account for real-world use and the safety of vulnerable users of Back Lane. This has not changed.*
- *The single lane width of Station Road at this point has not changed.*

ESCC Highways also voiced concerns about the proximity of the proposed access onto Station Road and Lealands Close. In their Consultee Response of 1st December 2021 stating that: “....it is considered that the site access is proposed in close proximity to the existing access to Lealands Close. This is a cause of concern, as vehicle movements associated with multiple accesses can cause driver conflict and confusion when indicating to turn from Station Road”.

As of 9th February their response to this latest planning application had not been posted to Wealden’s planning portal. We urge the Parish Council to raise this as an additional reason for objecting to the Planning Application.

Also there is no footpath on Station Road at this point.

IN ADDITION: Sewage and water

SEWAGE:

Now consider the issue of sewage—an issue that is already failing our community. In the past six weeks alone, raw sewage has had to be pumped out of the River Grom after repeated overflows. It happened regularly during 2025 and 2024 since the original application. This is not a minor inconvenience; it is a stark warning that the system is already at breaking point. If the infrastructure cannot cope today, adding 21 additional homes on elevated land will only drive it further into crisis. Wealden District Council has been unequivocal: no development can proceed where sewage infrastructure is already compromised. Their stance reflects serious concerns about Southern Water’s network and the very real risk of further strain on local drainage and sewage systems.

This is not a theoretical problem. It is happening today, in our community, and this development would push an overstretched system even closer to breaking point.

Another reason to object to the planning application.

WATER SUPPLY

Then there is the issue of water supply. Groombridge has been lucky to date in the winter period but communities within Withyham Parish Council have been impacted and this must raise questions about the adequacy of capacity levels to cope with an additional development such as the one proposed.

CONSTRUCTION PHASE:

Although this may not be a formal planning issue, it is impossible to ignore the very real impact that 32-tonne construction trucks would have on Station Road if this development is approved. These enormous vehicles will be required to remove the remains of the existing four-bedroom house that must be demolished to create the proposed access. It’s environmentally unfriendly to demolish. On top of that, major excavation will be needed to re-engineer the gradient of the current driveway—work that will demand repeated heavy-duty vehicle movements.

In the early stages especially, these trucks will have no choice but to sit, idle, and queue along Station Road as they are loaded. And because they are not allowed to cross the railway bridge, they will be forced to turn around in Lealands Close, bringing noise, disruption and risk to this part of the village and all residents.

These trucks will not only create significant congestion problems on the narrow section of Station Road but cause further break-up of the road surface on Broadwater Forest Lane.

For those who enjoy using Back Lane they will have to endure vans and trucks travelling to and from the site crossing Back Lane. This will go on for months and effectively churn up Back Lane making it dangerous for all users and therefore unusable.

OTHER MATTERS

The land set aside for a doctors' surgery is a sweetener. It is important to remember that any go ahead would be entirely dependent on agreement from NHS properties and funding from NHS finance. This is by no means a certainty with a surgery already in the centre of the village. Should it go ahead the number of journeys to and from the site would significantly increase adding to safety and risk for residents. For a larger proportion of Groombridge's residents it would require a longer journey (either on foot or by car) than the current surgery because it would be further away from the more densely populated area of the village.

Then there is the school. Yes, numbers are down but that is a national problem with falling birth rates. If this development were to go ahead there is absolutely no guarantee that the occupants of the dwellings would be families with children of primary school age. In addition, there are over 1,000 homes planned on the southern side of Tunbridge Wells.

Inevitably these houses will attract families eager to find places in smaller village schools.

Finally, we should be very careful what we wish for. 21 homes may seem like a small number of homes.

Groombridge may need small scale development of affordable housing, but this is not in the right place, nor is it the right kind of development. We urge the Parish Council to object to this development for all the reasons above.

The Chairman of the Withyham Parish Council Rights of Way Advisory Committee made the following statement regarding application 6.1:

1. Drainage on to Footpath 34.

The applicant's plan for surface drainage to the south of the site would in practice use Footpath 34 as a drainage channel, so be even worse than happens now from the existing fields. What effect will it have on the railway embankment where much of it would go?

2. Section 106 agreement to improve Footpath 34.

A possible S. 106 is mentioned in the Introduction to the Transport Plan (para 1.5). There is no promise it will be enacted.

Should it happen, there is no specification of the improvements, which must be significant and permanent enough to deal with the drainage.

The path extends eastward beyond the boundary of the development. The upgrade must include the whole path, from the railway to the Harrisons Rocks driveway.

Should it be agreed, it would probably not be done until the rest of the development was finished, so years away. If the applicant is serious, they could implement the S. 106 before the rest of the development.

3. *Protection of Footpath 34 and Byway 32. must be maintained so they are kept open and unobstructed throughout during construction.*

4. *Byway 32 will be crossed by the access road. To stop vehicles from the estate using the southeastern stretch to the top of Station Road, bollards are to be placed at the junction to prevent such vehicles turning. However, their spacing shown on the plans would not restrict smaller cars or motorcycles.*

5. *Footpath WIT/73/1 access on to Station Road is opposite the Estate exit. Many extra vehicles turning at the new junction will adversely affect the safety and walking experience of users of the path.*

6. *Road Safety Audits carried out in 2021 / 22, between 13:30 and 14:00 hours in fine weather bear no relation to the real world such as morning and afternoon rush hours, especially in poor visibility and bad weather.*

A member of the public spoke in favour of the application 6.1. They questioned if the objections were the loud minority rather than the general feeling of the residents. They noted that the location is well hidden by hedges and the railway line.

Wealden District Council Cllr Hulbert spoke to residents in attendance and thanked them for their comments. She confirmed that her role is to listen to all views from residents so she can represent them. It was anticipated that this application would be call into the Planning Committee Majors committee at Wealden District Council for decision. She also reassured residents that she had spoken with the planning officer for 6.1 and confirmed that all responses submitted to Wealden District Council would be read by the Officer and considered. Residents were encouraged to make comments directly to Wealden District Council.

The Chairman thanked all those who spoke and all those present for attending. The Chairman opened the meeting.

1. **ENQUIRE WHETHER ANYONE PRESENT INTENDS TO FILM, PHOTOGRAPH AND/OR RECORD THE MEETING** – recorded by the Clerk for the purposes of the minutes – to be destroyed when completed.

2. **APOLOGIES** – Cllr Jill Pardey - Family Commitments
Cllr Deviani Parekh-Jones - Illness

3. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST** - None

4. MINUTES

4.1 **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 26th JANUARY 2026**

003143 **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 26th January 2026 be agreed and signed by the Chairman.

4.2 **MATTERS OUTSTANDING FROM THESE MINUTES** - none

5. **ENFORCEMENT** – Park Corner continues to be monitored by Wealden District Council Enforcement. Residents remain concerned about the activities being undertaken.

6. **PLANNING APPLICATIONS**
COMMENTS TO BE RETURNED TO WEALDEN DISTRICT COUNCIL

- 6.1 **WD/2025/2872/MAJ** LITTLE WOLD AND LAND TO THE REAR (SOUTH), STATION ROAD, GROOMBRIDGE, TN3 9NE Description: HYBRID APPLICATION CONSISTING OF: FULL APPLICATION FOR THE ERECTION OF 21 NO. RESIDENTIAL DWELLINGS AND DEMOLITION OF EXISTING BUILDINGS, CREATION OF A NEW ACCESS ROAD, INTERNAL ROADS, CAR PARKING, LANDSCAPING, DRAINAGE INFRASTRUCTURE, PUBLIC OPEN SPACE, OPEN SPACE FOR EXCLUSIVE USE BY THE SCHOOL AND ANCILLARY STRUCTURES. OUTLINE APPLICATION (ALL MATTERS RESERVED EXCEPT FOR ACCESS) FOR THE PROVISION OF SERVICED LAND FOR A DOCTOR'S SURGERY, AND ASSOCIATED ACCESS AND PARKING.

Wealden District Council Expiry date for comments: February 2026

<https://planning.wealden.gov.uk/Planning/Display/WD/2025/2872/MAJ>

The Committee noted that this is a hybrid application, comprising an outline element for a doctors' surgery and a full application for a major residential development. Members agreed that the impacts of both elements must be considered together.

The Committee noted that a similar application on this site was dismissed at appeal in July 2022. The Planning Inspector attached significant weight to the harm caused to the character and appearance of the High Weald National Landscape (HWNL). Members agreed that the current application has done nothing to overcome or materially alter the issues identified by the Inspector and that the same significant weight should continue to be applied to those findings. It was agreed that the previous Inspector's comments remain valid and directly applicable to the current proposal.

Members noted that the site lies within the High Weald National Landscape, which is afforded the highest level of protection under Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and paragraphs 180 and 182 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The Committee agreed that significant weight must be given to the conservation of the character and appearance of the High Weald National Landscape, and that the proposal would neither conserve nor enhance its special qualities. Members further agreed that the harm identified should be afforded substantial weight in the planning balance.

It was agreed that the current lack of housing supply does not outweigh the substantial weight that must be given to the protection of the High Weald National Landscape, except in exceptional circumstances, which Members agreed do not apply in this case.

The Committee noted that the adopted development plan remains the Wealden Local Plan 1988, under which the site lies outside the defined village boundary. While the emerging Local Plan was acknowledged, Members agreed that it carries limited weight at this stage in accordance with NPPF paragraph 48.

It was agreed that the proposal does not provide the right type of housing in the right location. Members noted that there is a recognised local need in Groombridge for one- and two-bedroom affordable housing, which this application does not adequately address.

Members of the public who addressed the Committee were thanked for their contributions. The Committee agreed that they supported the comments made by the representative of the Steering Group.

The Committee noted that objections had been received from Wealden District Council Biodiversity (in relation to flood waters affecting a historic woodland), the Internal Drainage Board, and East Sussex County Council Flood Risk. Members agreed that these objections raise serious concerns and should be afforded significant weight.

It was noted that East Sussex Highways had not yet submitted their statutory consultee response. The Committee requested that East Sussex Highways undertake a site visit prior to submitting comments, given the scale and sensitivity of the proposal.

The Committee considered the inclusion of a doctors' surgery within the application and agreed that this was not viewed positively. Members noted that the existing surgery is centrally located within the village, accessible on foot and by bus with a stop directly outside, has available parking, and is fully accessible. In contrast, the proposed location was considered to have poor public transport links, uncertain parking provision, and potential accessibility concerns relating to the access arrangements. The Committee requested clarification from the doctors' surgery as to whether they support the proposal and would relocate to this site should permission be granted, noting that without such confirmation the site could remain undeveloped.

Similar concerns were raised regarding the proposed forest school element. The Committee requested that the local primary school be consulted to establish whether there is support for, or a need for, this facility.

Withyham Parish Council Objects to this Application.

The meeting was closed for a member of the public to speak on Enforcement.

A member of the public spoke about the activities being undertaken at Park Corner and the feeling by local people that a lack of active enforcement was being undertaken by Wealden District Council. The Clerk advised that the Parish Council was aware that Enforcement were monitoring the site but had little influence on Enforcement action. It was recommended that the resident speak with Cllr Hulbert who was in attendance at the meeting.

The meeting was reopened.

6.2 WD/2026/0035/LB & WD/2026/0034/F OLD BIRCHDEN FARM, FORGE ROAD, GROOMBRIDGE, TN3 9PJ Description: REPLACEMENT OF EXISTING GLAZED ROOF AND TIMBER DOORS ON NORTH-EAST SIDE OF KITCHEN WITH A ZINC COVERED TIMBER ROOF WITH ROOFLIGHTS AND REPLACEMENT GLAZED METAL DOORS.

Wealden District Council Expiry date for comments: 12 February 2026

<https://planning.wealden.gov.uk/Planning/Display/WD/2026/0034/F>

<https://planning.wealden.gov.uk/Planning/Display/WD/2026/0035/LB>

The heritage planning statement gave a compelling argument for this application.

No neighbours would be affected, and it would be an improvement of the site.

Withyham Parish Council Supports this Application subject to the views of the Listed Buildings Officer.

6.3 WD/2025/2515/FR WILLETTS FARM, WILLETTS LANE, BLACKHAM, TN3 9TX Description: PART RETROSPECTIVE APPLICATION FOR INFILLING OVERFLOW LAGOON, RE-PROFILING OF LAND AND RE-SEEDING IT WITH GRASS.

Wealden District Council Expiry date for comments: 12 February 2026

<https://planning.wealden.gov.uk/Planning/Display/WD/2025/2515/FR>

It was agreed this was a sensible application and subject to the conditions stipulated by East Sussex County Council the committee would support it.

Withyham Parish Council Supports this Application

6.4 WD/2025/2811/LB & WD/2025/2812/F HAM FARMHOUSE, WITHYHAM ROAD, WITHYHAM, TN7 4BJ Description: DEMOLITION OF EXISTING CONSERVATORY AND REPLACEMENT WITH A SINGLE-STOREY EXTENSION, NEW OPENING THROUGH INTO NEW EXTENSION, CLOSING-UP OF EXISTING INTERNAL DOORWAY OFF HALLWAY, FORMATION OF NEW INTERNAL DOORWAY OFF HALLWAY. Re-consultation requested re: Amended description to remove barn conversion element.

Wealden District Council Expiry date for comments: 14 February 2026

<https://planning.wealden.gov.uk/Planning/Display/WD/2025/2812/F>

<https://planning.wealden.gov.uk/Planning/Display/WD/2025/2811/LB>

It was agreed there was no change to the comments previously made being:

“It was noted that the Heritage Statement and Design and Access Statement were both well-prepared and detailed. Members agreed that the existing conservatory was not in keeping with the historic building and was very noticeable from two public Rights of Way. The Committee expressed support for the application, noting that the proposed development would enhance both the property, the surrounding landscape and the view from the Rights of Way. Redevelopment of the Barn was seen positively. This support was, however, subject to the views of the Listed Buildings Officer.”

Withyham Parish Council Supports this Application subject to the views of the Listed Buildings Officer

- 6.5 WD/2026/0147/LDE HUNTS FARM, LADIES MILE, WITHYHAM, TN7 4BG COMMENCEMENT OF WD95 0155F (CONVERSION OF EXISTING AGRICULTURAL BUILDINGS TO ONE DWELLING AND GRANNY ANNEXE AND INSTALLATION OF 2 NO. NEW SEPTIC TANKS.)**
Withyham Parish Council have no comments on this LDE

7 APPLICATIONS RECEIVED AFTER THE AGENDA BY THE CLERK - None

003144 RESOLVED that the observations on the planning issues detailed in these minutes be submitted to the Planning Authority.

8 PLANNING DECISIONS FOR NOTING – All noted APPROVED

WD/2025/2007/F REMOVAL OF CESSPIT AND INSTALLATION OF BELOW GROUND FOUL WATER TREATMENT PLANT AND NEW SURFACE WATER ATTENUATION TANK WHITE HOUSE FARM, WHITEHOUSE LANE, CROWBOROUGH, TN6 1UY

ISSUED

WD/2025/2671/LDE COMMENCEMENT OF WD/1995/0059/F & WD/1995/0060/LB (CONVERSION OF EXISTING BARN TO DWELLING AND INSTALLATION OF 1 NO. SEPTIC TANK). HUNTS FARM, LADIES MILE, WITHYHAM, TN7 4BG

WITHDRAWN

WD/2025/1693/LB & WD/2025/1694/F INTERNAL ALTERATIONS, CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW LINK EXTENSION BETWEEN THE MAIN DWELLING AND OUTBUILDING, CONVERSION OF THE OUTBUILDING TO RESIDENTIAL USE, REPLACEMENT OF WINDOWS ACROSS THE MAIN DWELLING, INSTALLATION OF SOLAR PANELS AND THE CHANGE OF USE OF LAND TO RESIDENTIAL USE, TO INCLUDE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW GARAGE FORGE COTTAGE, WITHYHAM ROAD, WITHYHAM, TN7 4BD

APPEALS DISMISSED

Appeal Ref: APP/C1435/D/25/3375044 Gillridge Farm Oast, Gillridge Lane, Crowborough, East Sussex TN6 1UR

- 9 **MATTERS OF URGENT IMPORTANCE FOR NOTING OR INCLUSION ON A FUTURE AGENDA** - Planning Policy on Pre-Application Discussions to be reviewed before May statutory meeting. Wealden District Council 'Focused' Draft Wealden Local Plan (Regulation 18) Consultation running from Friday 6 February 2026 to 5pm on Friday 20 March 2026.
- 10 **DATE OF MEETING** - noted that the date of the next meeting is on **Monday 23rd February 2026 at 6.30pm** to be held at The Parish Office unless otherwise notified by the agenda.

The meeting closed at 7.28pm